Left Side of the Chest

by jenny_wren

Summary

After an alternate final battle, Harry decides to move on to another universe and maybe a second chance at home

Notes

Warning for mentions of torture and iffy consent sex but all in the past, nothing onscreen
“See,” said Luna.

Hermione and Ron saw.

The boy-who-lived-twice was stretched out on his back floating eight feet off the ground as the contents of the kitchen drawers battled above, around and below him. The Hogwarts house elves were watching indulgently as they dodged around the clashing cutlery to prepare dinner.

Harry’s wands were tucked out of sight as he conducted his armies with his forefingers. His eyes were closed and he was smiling slightly.

“Okay,” said Ron, “I’m mildly disturbed that I can tell the teaspoons are about to lead a successful breakout against the forks any moment now.”

“Clearly the spoons are going to win,” agreed Luna.

Hermione sighed. She’d been doing that a lot since Ron hooked up with Luna. At that moment one of teaspoons gave a great yell and charged through the air to slam into a conglomeration of forks. The remaining teaspoons flew after it shrieking. Hermione watched for a few moments longer.

“All right,” she said. “Something has got to be done because I am starting to pick up the same radio signals as the rest of you. The knives are about to counterattack but they still won’t win.”

Luna elbowed her cheerfully. “I knew the Spurlworts would eventually leave you alone.”

“Luna, I liked being infested with Spurlworts.”

“Oh. How sad.”

The knife counterattack was head off by a column of soup spoons howling like banshees.

“Harry, you’re interrupting dinner preparations,” Hermione scolded.

“The elves don’t mind, Mione, they think it’s a challenge,” said Harry without moving his lips.

Ron shook his head. Enough was enough, “I agree with Luna,” he said, “something has got to be done.”

“What do you want me to do, mate?” asked Harry, as a sole brave tablespoon took on a platoon of fish knives.

“Something more than lying around getting in the elves’ way.”

“Like what? Run for Minister of Magic and spend the years turning into some combination of Dumbledore and Voldemort.”

“Oh no, you’d be much worse than both of them,” said Luna happily.

Hermione and Ron looked at her.
Luna stared back unblinking.

“Moving on,” said Ron quickly. “Isn’t there anything you want to do? Or anybody you want to do things with?”

“Not really.”

“Harry,” protested Hermione.

“What would be a challenge, after Dumbledore and Voldemort? Who would see me instead of the-boy-who? This world is too fragile for me, whatever I do will break something.” Teaspoons slammed through seven carving knives, pinning them to the wall in demonstration.

“You don’t have to use your powers,” Hermione tried.

“Maybe, if nobody knew about them. But the fastest gun in the West always got gunned down by somebody looking to take out the fastest gun in the West.”

Luna translated that out of Muggle for Ron in an audible whisper.

“Damn,” he said. “You’ve been thinking again, Potter. I’ve told you that’s not good for you.”

Harry laughed and the teaspoons successfully ambushed the pudding forks.

“So what do we do?” Hermione looked away as she struggled to come up with a suggestion.

“Simple,” said Luna. “We send Harry away.”

“What!” came in stereo from Ron and Hermione, before they could say anything more, Harry said,

“That sounds really nice.” He actually sat up and bobbed down through the air until his head was level with theirs.

“You need to open your eyes Harry,” Hermione reminded.

“Oh yeah, thanks.” Harry’s eyes blinked open.

“Why would we send Harry away?” demanded Ron. He was trying not to think that he preferred it when Harry’s eyelids were shut and he didn’t have to look into those Avada Kedavra eyes. Harry was one scary bastard.

“It sort of makes sense.” Hermione twisted her hands nervously. “Harry is basically a really good soldier with no war left to fight. I’m sure we could find him a war somewhere where he’d be useful. Another Voldemort maybe.”

“You want to send to another universe.” Ron’s attempt to wave his arms in frustration was cut off by a squadron of swooping butter knives. “We’ll never see him again.”

Both girls stared at him.

“Okay, so we’re not going to be seeing him for much longer anyway.” Apathy and a lucky ex-death eater were going to combine sooner or later. “But still, it’s a big step.”

“I’d like to be useful again,” said Harry.

“Oh God,” said Ron. There was something painfully empty in Harry’s eyes, like a weapon
deprived of its purpose. Ron was tempted to suggest Harry hang around and extract his pound of flesh from the Wizarding World but that would do nobody any good in the long run.

“We can do better than that mate,” he said. “The changing universe spell is set up to focus on a person. There anybody you’d like to see again?”

“Sirius.”

“Really? Not your mum or dad?”

“Sirius. I wouldn’t mind seeing my mum and dad, but I want to see Sirius again. The Sirius he was before Azkaban.”

“Harry?”

“Yes Ron.”

“Why are Mione and Luna exchanging meaningful glances?”

“I might, just might, have had a bit of a crush on Sirius.”

“Oh,” said Ron, because ‘a bit of a crush’ was undoubtedly a complete misnomer. One thing Harry was not, was tepid in his emotions. He was indifferent or full throttle, no half measures. “You do know it won’t be him, right?”

“Yeah. But it will be Sirius as he was, before. Or Sirius as he might have been if he had been allowed the time to get over Azkaban.”

There was a faint cracking sound and one of the elves said,

“Please Master Harry, Master Harry not be breaking all the dishes again.”

“Sorry Nippy.” A wet squelching sound and Nippy said,

“Thanking you, Master Harry.”

“Sirius, huh.” Ron decided that wasn’t too bad an idea, because that indifferent, full-throttle thing, that was Sirius Black too. Together he and Harry would light up the world or burn it down. Thinking about it, Ron was rather glad it wasn’t going to be his world.

“Me too,” said Luna. “I want the time to find a crumple-horned snorkack.”

Ron nodded his head. He was so tired of death and dirt and blood; hunting crumple-horned snorkacks sounded just fine to him. Hopefully Luna would agree to try spotting them from the deck of a Nile river boat for a couple of months.

“You remember to keep your head down, mate.”

“Oh yes,” Harry grinned goblin-like, “I never make the same mistake twice.”

“Are we sure this is the right thing to do?”

“Hermione, I’ll be fine.”

“I know you will be, I’m worried about this other world.”
“They’ll regret it if they’ve locked Sirius up for twelve years again,” Harry agreed amiably.

Hermione winced.

“So how’s it work anyway?”

“You click your heels three times and say ‘There’s no place like home’,” Luna beamed.

Harry nodded, “It was fun guys.”

“Luna’s mistaken, that’s from a children’s...” Hermione broke off as Harry popped out of that existence.

“Oh.”

“I was expecting something a little more dramatic than that,” Ron admitted.

There was a sudden cacophony as every piece of cutlery shattered except for the triumphant teaspoons.

“Okay, still not really what I was looking for.” There was a low rumble as every brick in the castle started to tremble. “But it’s more than good enough for me,” Ron added hastily, and the rumble dropped.

“Are we sure that was a good idea?” asked Hermione. “I mean, even if it’s before Azkaban, I don’t think Sirius was ever exactly stable.”

Luna smiled. “Neither was Harry.”

Harry popped back into another existence and immediately dropped to the ground in a protective crouch. Categorising he saw, no movement, trees, bramble, path and still no movement. Relaxing a little, but still in his crouch he scuttled until he had a tree between himself and the path.

He took three deep breaths as adrenaline flooded his body and fight or flight kicked in. He grinned, he felt more alive now than he had since the moment Voldemort shrivelled to nothing and he realised he had won – nothing.

This, however, was a brilliant idea. He owed Luna, well, he wasn’t sure what but he owed her something good. (In another universe not too distant, Crumple-Horned Snorkacks suddenly existed, complete with crumpled-horns and a very confused moo.)

Harry watched the forest and the path but picked up nothing more than natural to-be-expected sounds. As he looked at his surroundings more carefully, he realised he was just off the path to Hogsmeade about half way between the village and Hogwarts.

Given the choice, Harry decided to pick Hogsmeade. He had no intention of just offering himself up to Dumbledore. He glanced down at himself. He was wearing his battle-dress robes, two Auror standard wand holsters, dragon hide armour and enchanted salamander skin boots.

He had to get rid of it all. Right now.

He stripped off his burdens, abandoning them in a disorganised heap. He was left in Muggle jeans, sweater, and ratty trainers and felt more like himself for than he had in years.
He looked down at the discarded wand holsters. Two wands would make him conspicuous, Wizards needed time to attune to a wand and using two wands usually interfered with that.

Snapping Voldemort’s wand wasn’t a hard decision to make. He didn’t like the wand, it had channelled too much dark magic for him to trust it. He’d only kept it because everybody seemed to expect him too.

He took his own wand, battered and worn like he was himself, and cast a determined Incendio. Without a Wizard’s magic to power their protections, the expensive gear went up like tissue paper.

Harry grinned and tucked his wand into the pocket he had laboriously sewn to the leg of his jeans. As he glanced down he caught sight of the Potter and Black family rings on his hand.

The Potter ring belonged to somebody he wasn’t, but it cost him a pang to slide the Black ring from his left heart finger. Sirius was alive here, though, so it had to go too. Holding the two rings loosely, he brought his arm back and threw them as hard and as far as he could into the darkening forest, turning away before he saw them land.

With a light heart he set off for Hogsmeade.
Chapter 2

Roslerta’s attention flew to the door as it chimed. Everyone in the pub, even those lost in their drinks, all checked too. Her favourite customer had enchanted the door to chime whenever an unknown opened the door.

This was no white-masked nightmare though. The boy who tentatively poked his head around the door was a skinny, scruffy thing obviously Muggle and obviously starveling.

“Uh hi.” Still in the doorway he gave a quick nervous wave but made no attempt to introduce himself or name his friends and sureties. Which meant he must have none.

“Come in quick child,” Rosmerta hurried around the bar to encourage him inside. “Quick now, we can’t afford to leave the door open for long.”

“Uh, okay.” He obediently stepped inside, but his green eyes were puzzled.

“The Wards are so much weaker when the doors are open.”

“Wards?”

“Yes, to protect the place in case They come. Wait, you do know about magic, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he looked positively sulky and Rosmerta gave in to the urge to ruffle his messy black hair. He flinched like he thought she intended to hit him.

“Sorry child, of course you do,” she soothed, patting at the air just above his shoulder. Though there was no of course about it. Every year a few born-Muggle wizards or squibs would stumble on the Wizarding World, usually without the faintest idea of what they were letting themselves in for. If he had been one of them Rosmerta would have charmed her favourite customer into obliviating him and ensuring he returned safely to the Muggle world. This one though, he was the other sort, the desperate ones who knew they were different and had suffered for it.

“And you know about the, the Death Eaters,” she couldn’t help lowering her voice.

He hunched his shoulders. “What about them?” he asked all scornful street-tough.

Roslerta sighed. No, this one wouldn’t be returning to the Muggle world.

“So what is your name child?”

“Harry.”

“Harry..?” she asked leadingly.

“Just Harry. I’ve got no relatives who want to claim me, so I’m not claiming them.”

“So how long you been on your own Harry?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Right.” She wondered how old he’d been when he’d run away but doubted he’d ever tell her. She
wondered if she had enough strength to try and help yet another runaway. But how could she turn him away?

“So you’ve got magic in you then.”

“Of course.” There was the insulted look again. “Got a wand and everything.” He drew a wand from a long pocket sewn with large ungainly stitches to the leg of his jeans.

Rosmerta stared at the scrappy worn thing that must have been in a thousand fights and wondered who had sold him such a broken-down wand. She shook her head,

“You were rooked child. That thing’s about to shatter.”

“It’s my wand.” He clutched it protectively to his chest.

She sighed, “Do you even know any spells?”

“Yes, lots. Read about ‘em in books.”

Rosmerta looked at his conspicuously empty hands. However he managed access to magical books, he didn’t have them now. She knew what some of her runaways had done to earn their bread and tried not to imagine how the scrawny youngster had obtained a look at magical books. She wished she could believe it was as innocent as reading the books in Flourish and Blotts, but nobody so obviously Muggle would have survived Diagon Alley.

“Go on then, move those empty glasses into the kitchen.”

The boy waved his wand and muttered under his breath. All six glasses floated gently across the room to settle in the kitchen.

“I’m impressed,” she said, “that was some control for a self-taught.”

The dour expression on the boy’s face, flitted through puzzlement at the praise before settling on a smug smile.

“See, I told you.”

Rosmerta shook her head. He was good, strong too. Any reputable Wizard or Witch who’d met him would have taken the boy straight in and found him an apprenticeship.

“So,” she asked as if she didn’t already know. “Why are you here?”

He shrugged his shoulders again, “Just thought I’d have a look around.”

“Uh huh. You looking for work?”

“Maybe.”

“Can you cook and clean?”

A sly smile lit up the boy’s face. “Sure can.”

“All right then. You can have a week’s trial for bed and board. Then we’ll see.”

“Done.”
Harry, still grinning, settled down to work with a will. He had been expecting suspicion and questions but instead Madam Rosmerta had just accepted him as a self-taught Muggle-born. He knew there were magical children who didn’t go to Hogwarts, it made sense there were also Muggle-borns who never went. If he had really been Vernon and Petunia’s son he doubted he’d have ever made it to Hogwarts.

When Rosmerta had asked him his name he had actually had the strangest impulse to answer Harry Dursley. Harry Potter was the creation of a Wizarding World three universes to the left. At base, Harry was just Harry Dursley still stuck in his cupboard.

It had been easy to play up to Madam Rosmerta’s obvious assumption that he was a Muggle runaway with dubious morals, because, fundamentally, that’s what he was.

And now to his intense amusement, although he had two Orders of Merlin and six mouthfuls of magical titles, he was right back where he started, elbow deep in soapy water scrubbing at pots and pans.

There was something deeply satisfying in that. As if, in some unlikely way, he’d actually managed to come home.

The kitchen at the back of the Three Broomsticks was larger than the Dursley’s and instead of clinically modern, it was built in the usual slightly wonky magical style. The enchantments seemed welcoming and the stove gave off a friendly warmth. The tiled floor frankly need a good scour and polish but Harry would get to that tomorrow.

For now he was concentrating on the teetering piles of pots and crockery from the dinner rush, and enjoying the sink. It wasn’t the shallow metal sort that spitefully spit water everywhere but a huge old-fashioned ceramic Victorian butler sink that dipped down to his knees and came with a helpful charm that had everything floating just below the waterline. Harry patted it in appreciation and it gurgled cheerfully back.

From the little he’d overheard, this universe didn’t seem all that dissimilar to the one he’d left. He’d clearly landed back in the middle of the fight against the Death Eaters, but Harry had been at war or in hiding for his whole life until the last year. While he couldn’t exactly say he was happy to back, it was at least familiar. Almost comfortable really, in comparison to the last strained year and its queasy mix of near worship and deep suspicion, sometimes from the same people, sometimes from the same people at the same time. The over-riding impression he’d received from the Ministry was it that it had been bad taste on his part not to get himself heroically slain. Percy Weasley told him the plans for a Memorial Statue had been quite ruined.

Maybe Hogsmeade was a little more on edge here. It was hard to tell, Harry had been too focused on Hogwarts before to remember clearly. The shops had all been boarded up tightly when Harry walked past. And he didn’t recall the Three Broomsticks being warded either. He’d nearly tripped over the welcome mat in surprise they were so fierce. He could almost reach out and touch the protective magic it hung so heavy in the air. Fortunately the wards had decided they liked him, coiling around him like a friendly snake. He rather thought anyone they didn’t like would find it near impossible to stay as their strength turned suffocating.

He stacked the plates in the drying racks and tutted over the frayed drying charm that stuttered into action. He knocked his knuckles against the wood frame.

“Do your best for now, I’ll see if I can clean your runes down later.”
The drying rack hitched twice like it had hiccups and there was a burst of warm air.

“That’s the ticket.”

The cooker started sulking then so Harry was looking around for something to shine its doors, when Rosmerta called him from the bar,

“Can you come help me with the empties?”

“Just a minute.”

He bumped his hip against the cooker in apology for the delay and grabbed a bar towel to dry his hands before hurrying out.

He stopped abruptly half-way between the bright kitchen and dark bar, and stared.

“Oh.”

A wizard had just stepped into the pub and was pulling back the hood of his robe. His dark hair fell with casual elegance around a handsome, aristocratic face with beautiful haunted grey eyes.

Harry stopped breathing.

Clutching at Madam Rosmerta’s arm, he struggled to get his voice working,

“Who is that?” he whispered. It had to be, he couldn’t be wrong, fate couldn’t taunt him like that. It had to be...

“Sirius Black.”
Sirius was fraying at the edges by the time he finally made it to the Three Broomsticks. Being stuck at Hogwarts all day had been bad enough, and then just as he’d been about to escape when he been yanked back by the sharp call of his name.

“Sirius!”

“What?” he had growled, halting his headlong rush down Hogwarts’ stairs. “We’ve had a day-long staff in meeting in which we replayed the exact same conversations we have every August before the new term starts. I’d think I was in a bloody time loop, except then there’d be the possibility of getting out of it.”

Remus smiled at him. Sirius hackles raised, Remus only smiled at him now when he wanted something and Sirius hated it.

“What?” he demanded again.

“I was thinking we should arrange some joint classes. Shall we discuss it in the library?” Remus made a nervous plucking gesture as if he would physically pull Sirius up the stairs – if he could actually bear to touch him.

Sirius was definitely suspicious now. Remus was trying to keep him from the main south corridor. He turned back to continue on his way, and heard drifting up the stairs.

“Thank you Headmaster, I will see you at the Sorting Feast as usual.”

James. James wasn’t supposed to be at Hogwarts today. Sirius’ feet automatically speeded up and he clattered down the stairs and out into the corridor. James and Dumbledore turned to face him.

“J-,” he started before he remembered, “Professor Potter.”

“Professor Black,” James glanced down and away. James didn’t like bumping into Sirius at Hogwarts any more than Sirius did.

Before Sirius could construct what he wanted to say, there were soft footsteps on the stairs and Remus appeared.

“Gentleman, I trust you will remember the standard of behaviour I expect from my Professors.” Dumbledore favoured them with a benignly dotty smile and drifted off in the direction of the Great Hall.

“James,” Remus cried over-enthusiastically. “It’s lovely to see you again after the summer. The weather really has been spectacular this August.” Sometimes he could give Sirius’ Cousin Narcissa a run for her money in the stupid small talk stakes.

“Remus,” James nodded.

“So we’ll be going then, shall we Sirius,” Remus twisted awkwardly in place.

Sirius glared because he didn’t need to be condescended to, and Remus had to have been watching the map to have turned up so opportunely to try and head him off. That was secondary though,
because James was here when he wasn’t scheduled to be, the Death Eaters were getting bolder every day, and James was where he wasn’t supposed to be.

“Is —” he broke off to wave one hand in frustration, mouth blocked up with things he couldn’t say.

“I just stopped by to let the Headmaster know I’d be teaching Wizarding Law as an advanced option, just like normal,” said James, talking a spot just above Sirius’ left ear.

Sirius squinted at him, trying to work out if that was a secret code for ‘Voldemort attacked and we’re all dead’. Then he realised exactly what James had said.

“Just like normal,” he repeated.

“Yes,” said James, and then he added, “Sorry.”

“But,” he stopped himself before he could say anymore. Because Remus was still there and wasn’t showing any sign of buggering off.

James’ eyes cut to Remus, “I’ll see you around.” He bobbed his head and strode away.

Sirius growled out loud with sheer frustration.

Remus tutted, “You shouldn’t push him. Be grateful James even acknowledges you.”

He growled again, because it wasn’t as if he hadn’t heard Remus say the same words over and over again.

“Fucking time loop.” He punched the wall as hard as he could, something crunched, and pain lanced through his hand. “Fucking hell,” he shook his hand out and had to blink to clear disappointed tears from his eyes.

“And what exactly are you trying to prove?” demanded Remus.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.” Sirius clenched his good hand in a fist and thought about taking another swing at the wall.

“You’re a mess.”

There was the slightest softening in his voice and Sirius smiled up at him hopefully,

“Think I broke my hand, could you fix it? You know I’m hopeless at healing charms.”

Remus considered it, Sirius could see that, then his lips firmed and flattened. “No. You need to learn to think before you act.”

“Moony,” he appealed.

Remus turned away, “The past is another country,” he said softly as he started to retreat up the stairs.

Sirius narrowed his eyes, “I’ve always hated you habit of hiding behind quotes.”

Remus just kept walking up the stairs.

Sirius ground his teeth because he wasn’t any fonder of that particular habit. A long time ago, in Moony’s other country, James had said the only way to make Moony listen was to kidnap him, sit
on him and repeat yourself until he actually heard you. They missed dinner the afternoon they
convinced Remus they didn’t mind about him being a werewolf.

Sirius wished that was an option in this particular case.

“Goddamnit.”

Punching the wall again was starting to seem like a really good idea, and he slammed out of
Hogwarts before he could, because there was pathetic and there was pathetic.

He was just out of sight of the castle when he heard the whistle. For a moment he was tempted to
ignore it and just continue storming down to Hogsmeade.

The whistle came again and he turned obediently towards it. James stood waiting for him in the
shadow of the trees.

“Goddamnit,” said Sirius, because it bore repeating.

“Stupid mutt. Give me your hand, you’re crap at healing charms.”

“It’s fine,” he lied because he was not in the mood to accept favours from James. “I was just trying
to soften Remus up.”

“Uh huh,” said James, not looking in the least convinced. He sighed, “I am sorry Padfoot but...”

“Oh shut up,” he said tiredly. It wasn’t as if he didn’t already know everything James was going to
say. “Fucking time loop.”

“If you really...”

“No. You know I don’t mind.”

James made an obnoxious buzzing sound.

“Yeah, all right, I do mind. But it’s worth it.”

His best friend studied him carefully, before finally nodding, “All right then. I’ll see you at the
sorting feast.” He apparated away with a soft pop.

“Or not,” said Sirius wearily, grateful James seemed to have missed seeing the small, shameful
part of him that was insisting things were not okay and it wasn’t worth it.

With an effort he had managed to get himself going again. He was seriously in need of a drink, and
he didn’t drink alone anymore, it was too dangerous. So he had returned to his original plan and
made for Hogsmeade.

The path was dark with shadows, it was late to be out with the rumours of Dark Revels starting up
again, but frankly a good fight would do wonders for his mood. It was almost a disappointment to
make it to the Three Broomsticks unmolested.

As he entered, he pulled back the hood of his robe, not worried about trying to go unnoticed. The
good thing about The Three Broomsticks was that the clientele had got over their tendency to stare
long ago. It had been painful waiting for them to get used to him, but he was glad now that he
could have a drink without anyone sneering or trying to pick a fight.

So he was not pleased to see a wide-eyed Muggle-born staggering towards him on shaky legs.
Rosmerta picked up her skirts and hurried over.

“Sirius, don’t get mad. Harry’s a born-Muggle, just arrived, has no idea who you are.” She placed a restraining hand on each of their arms, “Harry, child, this is my favourite customer Sirius Black.”

Sirius bit back his impulse to draw his wand, or glare down his nose like a true Black would, and instead studied the young man Rosie seemed so fond of. The expression on the youth’s face didn’t make any sense. Sirius was rather a connoisseur of dirty looks – he had received enough – everything from death-stares to look-right-through-yous. This though, this looked like awe.

One trembling hand brushed against his cheek. It was an oddly asexual gesture, as if the born-Muggle wanted to verify what he was actually seeing.

“You’re here, you’re really here.”

Sirius could feel the brush of the young man’s magic following the path of his fingers. It was warm and gentle and he couldn’t help leaning into a little.

Rosmerta gasped and pressed her hands against her mouth. Backing up a couple of steps, she whispered,

“Coup de foudre.”

Sirius wanted to tell her coup de foudre was ridiculously over the top romantic myth found only in novels read by teenage girls. Unfortunately his mouth didn’t seem to be working just at the moment. Also, coup de foudre was looking a bit less like a myth with every second.

“You’re here,” said the young man again. The brush of magic came again, stronger and firmer this time. The back of Sirius’ mind noted the young man’s magic was seriously strong for a born-Muggle. The rest of his mind was scrabbling desperately to get a grip.

“You’re here,” his voice had deepened to a low growl, “And you’re unhappy.” The young man’s face twisted up into a furious scowl.

“You could do something about that,” Sirius lowered his lashes flirtatiously. His normal defences were completely collapsed and he was falling back on a tactic he hadn’t used since he was twenty-one.

The scowl vanished under a bright smile. Sirius couldn’t help noticing the young man had incredible green eyes.

“Happily,” his smile brightened even more.

Sirius felt a bit dizzy under the strength of it.

He had no idea what was going on but he didn’t exactly dislike it. Something waved in front of his face and he reached up to grab it, he didn’t want anything interrupting his view of those green eyes and smile.

“Sirius!” squeaked Rosmerta.

Sirius tore his attention away from the young man and realised he had grabbed Rosmerta’s wrist. He quickly let her go.

“Sorry Rosie.”
“It’s okay. Look, please take the key and get you and Harry upstairs and out of sight. My customers don’t need a free show.”

Sirius glanced around the pub and saw everybody’s attention was riveted to them.

“Shit, thanks Rosie.” He accepted the key off her and started for the stairs, hauling the kid after him. He still had no idea what was going on, but he was going to get to the bottom of this.

As soon as they were safely locked inside Rosmerta’s best room, he turned on Harry.

“Coup de foudre is a completely ridiculous concept, neither of us are fourteen year old girls, I can’t believe it even came up for consideration.”

Harry smiled, honest amusement sparkling in his green eyes, “I’d agree with you but I have no bloody clue what you’re talking about.”

“What? But?” And then Sirius remembered Rosie saying he was a born-Muggle. Even if he did know a bit about the Wizarding World, coup de foudre was hardly likely to have come up. “Alright then, coup de foudre is the instantaneous recognition of soul mates. Merlin, I can’t even believe I’m discussing this.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders, “Dunno. ‘Spect we’re both just really horny.”
Just horny.

Sirius near panic receded. Just horny. That made sense. He could deal with that.

“It’s pretty cool though,” Harry continued, “’cause I’ve slept with a couple of Wizards before and my magic didn’t feel anything like this.”

Sirius decided to ignore that comment. Because his magic was reacting strangely too. He was intensely aware of the warmth of the other man’s magic and his own magic just wanted to sink into that warmth. It had been a long time since he had slept with a Wizard so that must be it, he was lonely and horny and pathetic.

But then he already knew that.

Curious, he reached out and touched Harry’s hand. The jolt of magic was a sharp static shock and he gasped, hurriedly pulling back.

“Right, if it stings like that sex is out for the considerable future.”

“Oh no,” the kid shook his head. “We’re doing it. I’ve had sex with Muggles, which is fun but nothing special, I’ve had sex with Wizards which was better – well actually it was kinda skanky but I could see why it would be better. It was nothing as good as this.”

Sirius mentally filed away that comment on sex with Wizards being skanky. The melding of magics when Wizards or Witches had sex intensified and deepened the experience, even if the partners were just casual bedmates. For a melding of magics to be ‘skanky’, so did the relationship. Which meant Sirius owed some Wizards a visit at wand-point, because nobody hurt his Harry.

He blinked a little at the idea Harry was his Harry and was then caught completely off guard when Harry took two quick steps into his personal space and pressed their lips together.

The jolt was still there but no longer painful, it rippled over Sirius’ skin feeling like the feather light brush of fingertips. He shivered involuntarily and the hair rose on the back of his arms. Harry was taller than him, he noted, which was just unfair, somebody had seriously stacked the deck against him. Under the coaxing of Harry’s tongue, he opened his mouth and sank dizzily into the other man.

Mindlessly, he flung his hands out for balance and gasped in very much not pleasure when he banged his right hand against the wall and the broken bones shifted beneath his skin.

Harry stepped back quickly, “What’s wrong?” He was hovering a good foot away, hands extended as if he wanted to touch, but wasn’t sure his touch would be welcome. “Are you okay?”

“Not your fault,” Sirius closed the gap between them and slid his good hand around Harry’s waist. “Just banged my hand. I busted it on a wall.”

“Ahh,” Harry nodded knowledgeably, “Better than a mirror, or even worse a window.”

“Exactly.” Sirius beamed. He’d never met anyone before who appreciated the practicality of punching walls, not even James. Which was just foolish in his opinion given James was the one who had to clean up that one time Sirius did punch a window and bled all over everything after he
tore his wrist open on the broken glass.

“Let me see.”

Sirius held out his hand for inspection and winced at the misaligned bones still visible beneath the purple swollen skin. Abruptly it started to hurt a lot more.

“Geez, you were really going for it.”

“If a things worth doing, it’s worth doing properly.”

“Exactly,” Harry flashed him a quick smile. “Now, I’m not precisely bad at healing charms.”

“Uh huh,” he said sceptically.

“No honest, I can heal stuff no problems. Lots of practice.”

Sirius wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. He considered asking why a born-Muggle had a lot of practice with healing charms, but he was fairly sure that was a fire-whiskey sort of conversation,

“So when you say not bad?”

“It tends to hurt.” Harry looked down at him earnestly. “Quite a bit.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “You can’t be any worse at it than me. Give it a whirl.”

Harry grinned brightly and Sirius was suddenly aware that the kid really was a kid. He couldn’t be much older than Davey. The Harry focused again and aged ten years in a way Sirius hoped Davey never did.

Drawing his wand, he pointed it at Sirius’ hand and said, “Heal!” very firmly.

The world greyed out around Sirius and breathing became an issue. His whole hand felt like it was being turned inside out. He wanted to scream but he didn’t have enough air to manage it.

Slowly the world firmed back around him and he realised he was sitting on the floor with Harry kneeling at his side, arms wrapped around him.

“Sorry, so sorry,” Harry was whispering, “didn’t think, sorry.”

“Sweet Merlin. What did you do?” He blinked hard and stared at his hand. He wouldn’t have been all that surprised if it hadn’t been there – but it was, bruises and broken bones all gone. Flexing and twisting it, he inspected it carefully but couldn’t find anything wrong.

“Wow, you even got rid of the swelling, not even skele-gro does that, not completely.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry was still apologising, “I should have thought. I’m sorry. Usually by the time I’m healing somebody, they’re already unconscious.”

“Hey, it’s okay. It doesn’t hurt any more. And you were way better at it that I would have been. I’ve never had the knack for healing charms.”

“Huh.” Green studied him and Sirius shifted uneasily because they seemed to be weighing up his every flaw.

“So,” he said huskily, lowering his eye lashes and smiling up at his partner in a way he would have done fourteen years ago. “Where were we?”
Harry’s eyes went satisfactorily wide.

“I think we were about here.” He kissed Harry again, and it was just as good as before. Wriggling up off the floor, he straddled Harry’s lap and kept on kissing as Harry’s hands started work on jeans.

All the awkward and bewildering feelings he didn’t know how to deal with thankfully faded out under the sweetness of sex. Sirius understood sex, sex was good. In fact sex with Harry was a bit too good but he wasn’t going to worry about that now, instead he gathered his scattered wits and settled down to the enjoyable task of blowing Harry’s mind in return.

Sirius’ eyes blinked open and for a second he stared at the unfamiliar ceiling in complete confusion. His body reported in with a string of aches that suggested he wasn’t misremembering when he thought he had company last night.

He lifted one hand to rub at the stinging bite on the join of his neck. Harry was such a teenager, he hadn’t had a hickey in years.

Harry?

The unease nagging at him swelled to a shout. Sirius yanked himself away from the warm body still wrapped around him and sat up.

Harry snuffled in his sleep, rolled over and hooked an arm around Sirius’ thigh before settling back down.

In the half light of the early morning, he looked almost impossibly young. Sirius had no idea what he had been thinking. He couldn’t believe he’d fallen straight into bed with a kid who, judging by Rosie’s protectiveness, needed a friend more than a fucked-up Black fucking him up.

He needed to get out of there. There was no point hanging around. Even if, well, it didn’t matter. Somebody, a lot of somebodies probably, would be happy to let Harry know just how bad an idea Sirius Black was. And there was nothing Sirius could do about it. It would be better for both of them if they skipped morning-after recriminations.

He ruffled the raggedy black hair.

“Sorry kid, it really is for the best. But, uh, if you could do me a favour, just ignore me next time you see me. I’m not sure I could take you spitting at me.”

Gently he peeled the clinging hands away from his leg and stuffed a pillow in Harry’s arms to keep them occupied. The kid grunted and tightened his grip.

Not letting himself touch the soft skin, he stroked his fingertips through the air just above the kid’s face. Their magics brushed gently against each other and the slight tightness in Harry’s face smoothed out. Sirius thought he might even be smiling.

Before he gave in and ruined his good intentions, he climbed hastily out of bed and grabbed up his clothes.

Fully dressed, if not quite respectable, he crept to the door. Pausing he turned back to look at the kid. Drawing his wand he circled the tip then flicked the charm towards the sleeping boy.
“Dulci Somina, sweet dreams Harry.”

Downstairs his attempt at a clean get-away was thwarted by Rosmerta.

“Sirius Black, just where do you think you are going?”

“Running out, it’s what I do best after all.”

“Do not give me that claptrap.”

“Look Rosie, it will be better for everybody if I skip out before the shouting starts.”

“I think you underestimate him. He strikes me as the determined sort. When you think about it he’d have to be.”

Sirius’ mood darkened, “Yeah about that. As far as I can tell all he owns is what he was standing up in.”

Rosmerta nodded.

“And you hired him on?”

Rosmerta nodded again. Sirius shook his head, Merlin, but that woman was a soft touch.

“Give him an advance on his salary to buy what he needs. I’ll cover it if he bails.”

“As you wish Lord Black.”

Sirius blushed, “Sorry, that was a bit Lord Blackish, wasn’t it. I didn’t mean to. I just –”

“Got to you didn’t he.”

“No,” Sirius lied.

Rosie had the gall to laugh at him. “Don’t worry Sirius, I’ll keep an eye on him for you. But don’t stay away too long, he deserves better than that.”

“Better than me,” corrected Sirius. He brought his hood up to hide his face, turned sharply on his heel, and strode away.
Harry woke up snuggled up to a pillow. There was a disturbing sense of being totally alone. Struggling to open his eyes, he squinted around the room while his hands blindly patted across the bed.

Sirius was definitely not there.

Harry sat up, folded his arms, and pouted. This was not on. Sirius was supposed to be here. He’d been looking forward to waking up with someone for once. Ron had once said sleepy morning after sex was the best and Harry wanted the chance to try it.

He patted himself comfortably on the shoulder.

This was only the beginning, he pep-talked. After all, last night he got to see and talk and touch Sirius which was more than he’d ever hoped for.

It had been the real Sirius too. The one he’d caught glimpses of through the pain and loss of the Sirius he had known. Fogged over by Azkaban and his second imprisonment in Grimmauld Place there hadn’t been much of Sirius left by the time Harry knew him.

The Dursleys had a Great Aunt Enid, she’d been nice to Harry. Dursley-nice true, but still significantly nicer than anybody else. Then senility started to cloud her eyes and the Great Aunt he knew was eaten alive by a vicious, angry old woman.

Sirius had been like that. Mostly gone. Harry had loved what was left of his godfather, but the flashes of the real Sirius tantalised him. It had hurt talking to Sirius that last year as imprisonment in Grimmauld Place slowly obscured everything Sirius had recovered from Azkaban.

Last night, just for a second, Harry had seen that same lost, hopeless expression on this Sirius’ face and he had wanted to kill.

Then Sirius had grinned at him and Harry’s crush came throttling back full-force. He was a bit surprised he’d neither stammered or blushed, but Sirius had looked as off-balance as he felt and for once it seemed like he and his date were on the same side.

It was a nice feeling, that it wasn’t a battle somebody had to loose, but a joint conspiracy to enjoy themselves.

And they had really enjoyed themselves. At least, Harry had – maybe it had been nothing special for Sirius.

Maybe sex between Wizards always felt like that. Harry didn’t have much to compare it to. He’d had three magical partners: Blaise Zabini (to lower Zabini’s Occulmency shields), Lucius Malfoy (ostensibly to encourage trust between them, Lucius had thought Harry was trying to get the location of Horcrux out of him, in actuality Harry was distracting him while Hermione and Ron stole said Horcrux), and Severus Snape (because Snape was an opportunist with a freaky fixation on Harry’s eyes). Not unsurprisingly none of the experiences was anything to write home about. If Harry actually had a home to write to.

After Voldemort he’d a few one-night stands with Muggles, both men and women, but he had to
tell so many lies it always left him with the taste of bitter guilt in his mouth. Wizards and Witches he could have for the asking, but their greedy hunger gave him the shivers.

They only wanted the boy-who-lived and couldn’t have picked Harry out of a police line-up. They’d go for the heroic looking guy at the other end every time.

He did not, in fact, look heroic at all. Last night Sirius had called him a bedraggled little alley-cat. Even with his limited experience, Harry was pretty sure that did not count as romantic. It did, however, suggest Sirius had actually seen him, Harry, and wanted him for himself. That was better than romantic any night of week.

Sirius had even forgiven him for messing up healing his hand. Harry had never been able to work out why his healing charms were so rubbish. Nobody else made people cry when they healed papercuts.

But Sirius hadn’t complained, or yelled, just crawled onto Harry’s lap and kissed him. Trained in hit and run fucks, Harry had slid his hand straight into Sirius’ trousers and jerked him off, determined to see Sirius come before fate decided to mess with him again.

Sirius, warm and fragile in his hand, had moaned and gasped, coming hot and sticky across his palm. Harry had been too frantic to remember everything, to take in more than a scattershot of impressions. Bruise-tight grip on his hip, teeth of the zip catching against the skin of his wrist, soft gasps hot against the side of neck, magic sparking under his fingertips and Sirius relaxed and heavy across his thighs.

Harry had wanted to do it all over again right then and there.

But Sirius had pushed him away, and he’d sighed because he’d figured that was it. Then Sirius smiled at him, soft and gentle.

“Huh?” Harry had said, because had Sirius really called him an alley cat?

“It’s okay kid, now c’mere and let me return the favour.”

“Huh.”

Sirius ran one large hand through Harry’s hair and, oh that was nice, Harry pressed closer. Sirius chuckled at him and suddenly his hands were everywhere, soothing, petting and stroking. Drunk on Sirius touching him, it was almost a surprise when he came.

Dozy and sated, Harry was too far gone to pretend he didn’t mind when Sirius moved away again. He clutched at his lover with arms, legs and teeth.

“Careful, you need to take it easy on the old man. Rosmerta gave us the room with the good bed, let’s not waste it.”

And things just got better until Harry could see nothing but Sirius’ grey eyes and feel nothing but Sirius’ touch and the magic flaring to life between them. When they fell over the edge they went together. The spike of magic burnt across Harry’s retinas and he collapsed into darkness and Sirius.

Now Sirius was gone. Harry shivered and tugged the duvet up tight around him. He suddenly realised he was cold, a bone deep cold he hadn’t even noticed until Sirius’ presence had warmed him for those few hours.

The idea that last night had been nothing special to Sirius stung something fierce. But Sirius had at
least had fun, he was sure of that. And from what he’d heard, sex improved no end with practice. Harry was quick learner and he was more than up for practicing, with Sirius.

He hadn’t travelled to a whole new universe to fall at the first obstacle. After all, it took him seven attempts to destroy Voldemort. Harry did not shine at book-learning, or intelligence, or charm, or looks, or even sex apparently. Determination, though, that he had in spades. He grinned goblin-like.

Sirius Black didn’t stand a chance.

Rosmerta waited anxiously for her protégé to ask questions she wasn’t sure how to answer or to express dismay at Sirius disappearance.

But from the moment he bounced downstairs, Harry hadn’t stopped smiling. He was now singing something cheerful under his breath as he mopped the floor.

She finally decided she needed to say something.

“Sirius behave himself last night?”

“Nope.” His grin turned distinctly dirty.

Rosmerta laughed, “You’re too young to look like that.”

“I’m not young at all,” said Harry matter-of-factly.

On reflection, she supposed he wasn’t.

Harry spent the morning doing a bunch of the small maintenance jobs that had piled up while Madam Rosmerta had been busy keeping the day to day business ticking over.

“It’s too big a place for one person to manage on their own,” she sighed, then shook her head and smiled at Harry, “Ideally I’d have another three or four staff, so there’s a job for you as long as you want it, but I can’t pay you what I’d like.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Harry, because it was one-up on his last job, saving the world paid zilch. Not even expenses.

She sighed again, “I do nothing but worry about it. The rumours about the Death Eaters are getting worse. They say they found traces of a Dark Revel out in Wiltshire just last week. And maybe it’s a foolish worry when I might get snatched one day, but last time business was so bad I nearly lost everything.”

Harry shifted his feet. It did seem a foolish worry when he thought about how bad things would get, yet at the same time why should Riddle be allowed to destroy something as comfortingly normal as the Three Broomsticks. It wasn’t right.

Madam Rosmerta pushed herself to her feet, “Don’t trouble yourself, child. I’m sure we’ll be just fine. And Hogwarts starts again on Thursday, so things will pick up.”

“The Hogwarts students make that much difference?” Harry asked, because he didn’t remember anyone buying much more than a butterbeer or two.
“Hogsmeade Weekends,” said Madam Rosmerta. “Everyone’s happy to come for a day out on Hogsmeade Weekends because they know if any of the Death Eaters make a move the Aurors will be right there.”

“Because the Aurors wouldn’t come otherwise?” Harry asked dubiously, not sure he’d followed that right

“Well I’m not saying they wouldn’t come at all, but they’re going to be a lot more reliable about it when they know the Hogwarts kids are at risk. Nobody wants to go into a performance review and explain you were lingering over a second cup of tea while one of the Heads of the Ministry’s kids got snatched.”

“Guess not.” Harry rubbed the back of his neck, deeply uncomfortable. Had it been like back in his universe. He’d like to think not, but then he’d never considered the Aurors much of a source of assistance himself.

“Don’t you worry about it though, as long as we stick to daylight, I’m sure we’ll be fine.” Madam Rosmerta sounded like she was trying to convince herself, and failing. Then she brightened, “I’ve got my wards this time around too. It’s such a relief. And to be horribly prosaic, business hasn’t dropped off anything like it did last time. Everyone can sense it. You feel safer just stepping inside.”

Harry nodded. “They are very friendly wards.” He patted the magic coiling around him. He was pretty sure he couldn’t hurt himself if he tried. He’d slipped with the wrench when he was struggling with sink and the heavy metal lug had glided smoothly over his hand without barking his knuckles.

Madam Rosmerta smiled slyly. “Well they would be, wouldn’t they? My favourite customer set them up.”

“Favourite customer?”

“Sirius Black. I have no idea why his wards might have taken a liking to you.”

Harry could feel the scorching blush scrawl across his face and ducked his head to hide it. Unsuccessfully from Madam Rosmerta’s laugh.

“I’m sorry Harry child. It was too easy. Now come and get ready for the lunch rush.”

“I thought you said you weren’t busy?”

“In general no. But today I have secret weapon.”

Lunch was indeed busy and Madam Rosmerta’s secret weapon turned out to be Harry himself. He was unhappily used to being the centre of attention and people nudging each other and sneaking looks while pretending not to, so he didn’t immediately realize it was unusual for a universe where he was just Harry instead of the boy-who-would-not-die.

It wasn’t until a disgruntled young woman, ordering a butterbeer and chicken sandwich, looked straight at him and said,

“You’re just a scrawny nothing. How in Merlin’s name did you catch Black’s attention?”

that he realized why he was the centre of attention. It caught him off-guard and he could only stutter uselessly for a moment, and then Madam Rosmerta was there, chivvying back into the
kitchen.

“And you Kathleen Cokwell,” her voice angrier for the lack of volume, “I’d thought you’d have better manners than that. I’ll be speaking to your mother, young lady.”

“But,”

“But nothing. If you wanted Lord Black’s attention you could have smiled at him instead of twitching your skirts aside to avoid even brushing against him because you didn’t want to be associated with him.”

“Well of course I don’t want to be associated with a traitor like him. But he should still notice me.”

Harry’s hands tightened into fists. He’d put up with people treating him like an exhibit in a zoo even if he loathed it, but nobody got to talk about Sirius like that.

“Perhaps you should consider patronising some other establishment,” said Madam Rosmerta with stiff politeness.

“Fine, there’s nothing good here anyway. And – ouch, your wards are out of control, that stung. Come on Natalie.”

“But,” said another young woman, “fine okay, sorry Madam Rosmerta.”

“But,” said another young woman, “fine okay, sorry Madam Rosmerta.”

“Come on. Don’t be such a Muggle. Ow!”

Harry stroked the bristling magic of the wards soothingly. There was definitely a sense of good riddance as the two women clattered out the pub.

For the rest of lunch, although the knowing looks and appraising glances became more subtle, Harry mostly hid in the back. Finally Madam Rosmerta came back and said,

“Alright, I think we’ve fed everyone in Hogsmeade. Take off for an hour or two and get yourself some fresh air.”

“But what about dinner?”

“I can manage the prep. I have been doing this for a while you know.”

“Sorry Madam Rosmerta.”

“Call me Rosmerta, dear, and off you go. They should have calmed down a bit now, and you’ll have to show your face in Hogsmeade at some point. If you’re planning on sticking around…” she trailed off leadingly.

Harry glared at her, knowing he was coming across as stroppy and unable to help it. Sure he was planning on sticking around, he wasn’t going anywhere without Sirius, but he didn’t have to admit it out loud.

Rosmerta smiled at him like she knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Off you go.”

Harry went because even he could recognize a losing battle when he saw one.

Outside the sun was up but the heat of summer was already fading and the crisp chill of autumn
was in the air promising frosts to come. Harry shivered. He actually had a couple of galleons in his pocket from that other universe, and things seemed close enough that they’d match the currency here. He should probably buy a change of clothes, and maybe a coat. Warming charms could only do so much and they weren’t cosy, not like a scarf and gloves.

On the other hand he had more important things to worry about that than his comfort. He stopped in front of the bookshop.

Because Harry had plans. His Sirius plan was going better than he’d dared imagine (Sirius, here, smiling at him, touching him, he’d think he was dreaming but his dreams were never that good) but Harry was greedy. He wanted more. He wanted Sirius to understand how important he was, and he wanted everyone else to understand it to. Which meant courting.

He’d never paid much attention to courting when his classmates started getting excited about it in their sixth year because he couldn’t believe he’d ever be granted the opportunity what with the whole doomed to die thing. And there wasn’t anybody he wanted to court. He wasn’t a real person to that Wizarding World, not truly. None of them could even see he didn’t actually look that much like James Potter. They’d all grown so used to the photographs of James Potter that they sort of mentally imposed his picture over Harry. (It had maybe broken his heart when the Sirius in that universe had started saying again that he looked like James).

In that universe Harry was an ideal, a beacon of hope, the prophesied one. He couldn’t imagine the prophesied one snuggling on the sofa watching Muggle TV with someone who saw him as a beacon of hope. Ideals don’t snuggle.

But this Sirius, his Sirius, had seen him and held him, and damnit Harry was going to figure out how to treat him properly.

So he walked into the bookshop, trying to look like he belonged.

The salesman, a neat little man replete with self-satisfaction, snorted when Harry opened the door, “You must be Rosmerta’s latest charity case. The one who’s causing all the fuss. What are you doing here?”

“Good afternoon,” said Harry, “I’d like to buy a book.”

The salesman sniffed, “I doubt we have anything suitable for a born-muggle. We have Hogwarts students coming here, you know. And I have sold several volumes to Madam Pince for their library. I really don’t believe we can help you here.”

Harry set his jaw. “I would like to buy a book. On courting.”

“The way I hear it, it wasn’t courting you were doing with that degenerate.”

“I would like to buy a book on courting,” said Harry again, the bite sharp in his voice.

The salesman looked sour, then chuckled again. “If that’s what you want, far be it from me to stop you.” He walked across the cluttered shop to a bookcase in the corner and tapped his wand against the shelf. With a creaking groan the shelves reshuffled themselves like a tile puzzle until a dusty shelf was level with the man’s hand. He walked his fingers along the spines until he pulled out a small tattered hardback with faded gold print. He placed the book on the counter and slid it towards Harry.

“One galleon, seven sickles,” he announced, while the smile on his face said very clearly he didn’t
believe Harry had the money.

Harry put his galleons down on the table with neat precision.

“Oh it’s like that is it,” said the salesman, his laugh turning nasty.

“My change please,” said Harry.

“Well you’ve airs enough for a Lord I’ll give you that.”

“Change,” said Harry.

The salesman thumped the ancient cash register with the butt of his wand and it sprang open. A tap, and ten sickles shot out the tile to stack up in a pile beside the book. Harry collected his change and picked up his book.

“Thank you for your help,” he said, because it was clear him being polite annoyed the salesman no end.

Back outside he intended to sit down and study his book for some hints but a woman said loudly –

“There’s the boy now. So shocking. I think Rosmerta’s gone too far this time,”

– and Harry decided he he’d read the book later, went back to the Three Broomsticks and scrubbed the cooker shining.

Rosmerta watched the industrious whirlwind that had taken over her kitchen with bemusement. She’d finally told Harry that Sirius would be busy at Hogwarts in the run up to the start of term and never usually visited the Three Broomsticks until after dinner to try and cut down on his jack-in-a-box starts every time the door opened.

It was nothing more than the truth but at the same time she felt guilty because when Sirius had left, it seemed like he didn’t plan to come back at all. She couldn’t bring herself to straight out tell Harry that though. Perhaps Sirius would change his mind.

She could hope.

While Rosmerta was checking on the stew cooking on the hob, Harry took the opportunity to dart out into the bar and check again if Sirius was there yet. He was trying not to watch the door too obviously, but from her amused glance he figured he wasn’t being quite as subtle as he had hoped.

Sirius still hadn’t arrived.

Harry twitched impatiently and gratefully seized on the distraction when one of the customers, a big burly man with a bald head and beard, beckoned to him.

“Yessir?”

“Hey kid,” the man grinned showing uneven yellow teeth, “you looking for that bastard Black?”

Harry full attention lasered in on the man’s stupid face.
“He run out on you already, huh? Well let me tell you something about Black and running out.”
Neville and his entourage turned up late afternoon. His parents and trainers talked about a successful summer but to Sirius ‘the Prophesied One’ looked strung out and punch drunk. He caught the poor boy’s attention and smiled encouragingly. Neville stared at him blankly but his eyes screamed *help me*.

Steeling himself, he edged forward until the crowd of Order members and Professors had to notice him.

“Right then,” he said, “I’ll escort young Neville to the Pomfrey for his medical assessment, shall I?”

He collected several dirty looks for his presumption at speaking up but, as nobody else wanted to leave the mother’s meeting they called a Progress Update, Dumbledore said,

“Very well Sirius. I think the rest of us should adjourn to my office. I shall ask the house-elves to serve afternoon tea.”

Sirius ducked his head to hide his smile. They’d be gossiping away until dinner.

“Come along Neville,” he urged, leading the way out of the Great Hall. Once they were out of sight he dropped back to rest a comforting hand on Neville’s shoulder and was dismayed when Neville flinched violently.

“What have they being doing to you?” he demanded, stepping away to give Neville his space. The boy moved to follow him, then pulled back to stand on his own.

“Reflexes training,” he confessed miserably.

Sirius shook his head, he should have known. Neville was fifteen now which was the traditional age for reflexes training, but reflexes training was so obviously the last thing likely to help Neville, he had hoped that the Order would put it off.

Neville had stopped walking and was staring up at him with big eyes. He looked exactly like the fawns when they were little and wanted their hands held but felt they were too grown-up to ask.

Sirius had suffered through reflexes training himself under his mother’s tutelage the summer he turned fifteen. And he remembered how he felt when he made it back to Hogwarts after a summer of training, shying away from any movement but desperate for safe human touch. James had let him spend the nights curled up as Padfoot at the foot of his bed until sometime past Christmas. There was nothing Sirius wouldn’t do for James.

He held his hand out, and Neville grabbed on eagerly in a tight two-handed grip. Together they continued towards the medical wing.

“They keep sneaking up on you with stinging hexes?” Sirius did so hope it hadn’t been worse than stinging hexes.

“Yes, and pinches if they managed to get close enough.” Neville sighed. “It didn’t hurt, not really.”
Sirius sighed with relief, even though he knew it wasn’t so much the pain that was the problem but the jumping out your skin on a regular basis for weeks and weeks until the slightest sound made you twitch.

“They kept doing it when I was asleep too. I wasn’t good enough at coming up fighting. I did try, honest, but I was so tired sometimes I didn’t wake up until the third hex.”

He bit back his curses because it wasn’t fair to insult Neville’s parents in front of him, but fucking Merlin, what were Frank and Alice thinking? Frank could blather on about how Pureblood training had been the making of him but it was destroying Neville, and he and Alice were too scared-blind by the prophecy and Voldemort’s return to see it.

“You can sleep when we get to the hospital wing. In fact I suspect Madam Pomfrey will insist upon it.”

He was right, Madam Pomfrey took one look at Neville and said,

“Reflexes training?”

Sirius nodded, “Mild version.”

Madam Pomfrey snorted. “Right. Now you go straight to sleep Neville. You needn’t worry, Professor Black and I will make sure nobody disturbs you.”

Neville eyed the bed longingly. “I’m not sure I can. Whenever I’m nearly asleep, I think I hear something and wake right up.”

Sirius remembered that. “Okay, how about if I stay with you.” He swished his wand at the bed and turned it into a sofa. Sitting down he rested one of the cushions against his thigh to serve as a pillow. “Lie down, I’ll keep watch for you.”

“An excellent idea,” praised Madam Pomfrey.

Neville lay down, curling up into as tight a ball as possible. Madam Pomfrey grabbed a blanket from one of the other beds and draped it over him. Sirius rested his hand on Neville’s shoulder and Neville gave a shuddery little sigh before going still.

Sirius tilted his head, Neville’s face was lax and soft.

“He’s asleep,” he whispered.

“Best thing for him, poor love. I had hoped I’d seen the last of Pureblood training.”

“But Madam, it’s tradition,” Sirius hissed scornfully.

“Been slackening off these past sixty years.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh not your family. The Slytherins are always behind the times. But almost nobody trains girls these days. Sorry,” she added when Sirius winced at the memory of Bellatrix who had once been Trixie. “And this will be the third generation of Weasleys to have no training at all. The McLaggens and Macmillians are second generation. Your Mr Potter had no training either,” the Nurse smiled slyly, “and I think he’d take drastic steps to ensure nobody inflicted it on his son.”

“If James had a son.”
“Yes, if.”

There was an expectant pause. Finally, to break the silence, Sirius said, “Will you take a message to Owlery for me?”

“Of course. I’ll fetch you some parchment.”

It had been a spur of the moment decision and it took Sirius a while to decide what to write, in the end he went with,

*It’s not just me, you tosser.*

Because there wasn’t really anything else to say.

“Here,” he handed it over. “Give it to Hedwig, she’ll know where to go.”

Madam Pomfrey patted him on the head like he was Neville.

“You’re a good boy, Mr Black.”

She left. Having masterfully been reduced to schoolboy status, Sirius leaned back into the sofa and closed his eyes.

Harry’s face immediately appeared and he quickly reopened his eyes. He was not going to think about Harry. Not about how the poor kid was coping in a strange new world, not about what had put those shadows in his eyes and definitely not about how Harry had felt in his arms.

Last night definitely rated a twelve on the coffee scale (hot, strong and sweet) he and James had invented to rate their nocturnal encounters back when they were idiots. It just seemed wrong to apply the coffee scale to Harry, like trying to describe a music with words; you were missing so much out, you might as well not bother to try.

The thing was, James had stopped using coffee scale when he had started dating Lily, and Sirius thought that now he understood why. He was so completely screwed.

He’d have liked to get up and pace, and nearly did, just stopping himself from jumping to his feet and knocking Neville to the floor. Forcibly turning his thoughts away from Harry, he reminded himself of his responsibility for Neville. He could torture himself all he wanted but the poor boy deserved as much the sleep he could get.

Rubbing his thumb against his mouth, Sirius wondered if Madam Pomfrey would help him curse Neville with a non-painful but lingering illness that would let them keep him safely in the infirmary for the next month or two.

Maybe he could find the boy a pet. Something a bit more comforting than a toad, no matter how good toads were as spell foci.

Harry would need a familiar too, and he wasn’t likely to have the spare galleons for months. The kid had such a tattered wand, Sirius wanted him to have something better for a familiar. Maybe he could buy a kneazle kit and dump it round the back of the Three Broomsticks for Harry to find.

“No,” Sirius told himself firmly but quietly. “Not thinking about Harry.”

Instead he began to work on the current Arithmancy problem with their creation of Katschei’s Bane. Without a quill and parchment he didn’t get very far, but the mental maths involved kept his
mind out of trouble.

Finally Madam Pomfrey reappeared,

“Sorry, but it’s nearly dinner time. Neville needs to put in an appearance.”

Sirius shook him cautiously. Neville groaned and his arms spasmed. “Up you get,” he encouraged. The boy moaned and tried to burrow down under the blanket. “Up you get Neville, Moody would have you standing at attention for hours for this sort of laxity. Come on now.”

“Mr Longbottom,” said Pomfrey.

Neville flinched violently and sat up. “I’m awake,” he yelped, hands coming up to cover his ears and neck protectively. “I’m awake.” His eyes scanned the room blindly.

Sirius closed his eyes. He didn’t know which idiot had been in charge of Neville’s training but said idiot deserved to be hexed into oblivion. He might hate his own training, and his mother for inflicting it, but it had at least left him able to wake in an instant, wand automatically in his hand. Training Neville into cringing blind fear outraged Sirius because it was cruel, but even a stone-cold, insanely paranoid Slytherin like Moody should realise it was also bloody useless. In fact it was worse than useless, it was actively harmful both to Neville and their cause.

“I need to go and speak to the Headmaster,” he said through teeth gritted against the need to swear. “Neville I’ll see you later. Madam Pomfrey.”

“Good day Sirius.”

“Bye Pr’fessor Black,” whispered Neville, waving to him.

Sirius waved back. Sometimes he could hardly believe Neville was the same age as Davey. Despite all the extra training and attention, right then Neville seemed years younger.

He tracked Dumbledore down with renewed determination and caught him just before he and Remus entered the Great Hall.

“Headmaster, could you spare a few minutes to discuss Neville’s training with you. I really don’t feel this summer’s training was useful or productive.”

Remus snorted.

“What?” Sirius glared.

“You and James haven’t spoken for years, don’t even look at each other when you can help it and yet you’re still sharing the same brain.”

“What?”

“James came by and just said exactly the same thing, except he was a lot louder about it.”

“Any chance you listened?”

Dumbledore imposed himself upon the conversation, “I have told both you and Professor Potter on numerous occasions that Neville’s training is best left in the hands of his parents and the Order.”

“Okay, I get that you’re not going to listen to me, you effectively revoked my Order membership way back then, but could you please, please listen to James.”
“As I said, I do not feel it is your place to criticize the arrangements Neville’s parents have put in place to protect their son. James never underwent Pureblood training and is unable to appreciate the benefits.”

_No_, thought Sirius furiously, _he just patched me together every September_. There wasn’t anything James didn’t know about Pureblood training.

“If he were in the same position of as the Longbottoms, I have no doubt his views would change materially.”

_No they fucking wouldn’t_, he thought so loudly he was sure Dumbledore picked it up, even through his Occulmency shields.

The Headmaster just stared at him with grave disapproval for a long moment before moving off.

“Remus,” Sirius appealed.

Remus was already following Dumbledore into the Great Hall.

Without another word, Sirius turned sharply on his heel and strode towards the nearest exit.

Sirius stormed all the way to the Three Broomsticks before coming to an abrupt halt across the street. He couldn’t go inside, it wouldn’t do anybody any good. Harry had to have heard by now and Sirius knew his mood was too volatile to handle whatever the kid said with any grace at all. He’d either take a swing, or burst into tears and he wasn’t sure which option horrified him more.

He turned away for the Hog’s Head, it wasn’t as if he could face eating anything anyway, and firewhiskey suited his current temper better than ale. He was halfway there when Hedwig reappeared. She circled him slowly, preked loudly, landed on his shoulder and promptly nipped at his ear.

“Hey quit it,” he scolded, “I haven’t blown anybody up, even if I was tempted. I was a positive angel.”

Hedwig went for his ear again.

“Yeah okay, that was a bit of stretch.” He hooked the note from her leg.

_Eat something, you stupid mutt._

Sirius pulled a biro out of his pocket.

_Piss off, you nag worse than a wife_, he scrawled by way of reply. He twisted the parchment into a spiral and attached it Hedwig’s leg. With a shrug of his shoulder he encouraged her to take flight.

He stood still to watch her soar away in the cool summer air, and that was when the wards he’d set up for Rosmerta pinged.

It wasn’t the full out-flare of a Death Eater attack, just the prickle of more violence than Rosmerta was happy with. Still, it was enough to make Sirius take off at a run.

Shoving his way into the pub and past the gawping audience, he found a chaotic melee of bodies and shouting. He picked Rosie out first, trying to restore order, and pulled her back. She resisted at first, then recognised him,
“Oh Sirius, thank Merlin you’re here.”

“You shouldn’t get involved,” he scolded absently as he eyed the fight and tried to calculate the most effective point to intervene.

“I’m not going to let them murder Harry.”

Sirius suddenly spotted the shaggy black hair in the middle of the scuffling bodies and all his relief at finding nothing more than a bar brawl, burnt up in fury. His wand jumped into his hand, “Mobilcorpus.”

Flicking his wand, he threw the heavy bodies left and right to crash back against the walls, noting as he did so it was the three loud-mouthed Byerson brothers, until there was only Harry, wild and fierce, left.

Harry fumbled at the sudden disappearance of his attackers, glanced around, caught sight of Balin Byerson, the oldest and loudest brother, and dived for him.

Sirius hastily holstered his wand and lunged for the kid. Hissing and spitting, Harry fought him, even after he realised who held him.

“Lemme go Sirius, I’m gonna smash their faces in.”

Sirius very nearly lost his grip on the squirming kid when he understood that, as improbable as it seemed, Harry had jumped the Byerson brothers.

“Easy there alley cat,” he cautioned, fielding swinging arms and legs, “There’s three of them and one of you. And any one of them’s easily twice your size. Hasn’t anybody taught you to play the odds?”

“Smash their smug, stupid faces in.”

“Fucking Merlin.” Sirius finally got a good grip on his alley cat, picked him up and shook him. “Calm down,” he ordered, “if they really need their faces smashing in,” which he found hard to believe because the Byersons were only idiots, not full-on creeps, “I promise I’ll help you, but for now calm down.”

“Oh no, you don’t need to dirty your hands, not while I’m here.”

Which give Sirius the nasty feeling he knew what all this was about. “I don’t need you taking up for me.” He shook the kid again and was relieved to feel him go limp.

“You so do,” he said, suddenly all sulky, stubborn teenager.

Somebody laughed. “Sweet Merlin kid, why are you kicking up all this fuss over a stinking coward who sold out his best friend to save his own miserable hide.”

Harry’s head snapped around and his gaze narrowed in on the speaker, Turner, a plump little man who had an opinion on everything and wasn’t afraid to impose it.

“It’s the honest truth,” Turner defended himself. “You-know-who came calling and Black gave up the Potters, and You-know-who murdered that pretty little witch and her baby. Don’t know how Potter can stand to look at him without killing him,” he spat at the floor.

Sirius swallowed hard, because it still hurt to hear that disgust ever after all these years. Harry had
stopped glaring at Turner and was staring at him with huge green eyes. Sirius made himself meet those eyes, because Harry deserved it.

“It’s true,” he made himself say. “I told Voldemort where James was, I killed Liliana Rose and the baby.”

“Oh Sirius,” whispered Harry.

Sirius had never see somebody’s heart break before, wouldn’t have thought you could, but Harry was shattering to pieces right in front of him. For the first time since he told Remus, he had to clench his jaw to keep back the words that wanted to bubble out and explain the unexplainable.

“Sorry he aint the knight in shining armour you thought he was kid,” there was rough laughter in Turner’s voice and Sirius wanted to punch him for his amusement at Harry’s distress.

Harry’s wand was in his hand and there was killing intent in those green eyes. Sirius closed his own eyes because he couldn’t fight Harry, and he deserved it for forgetting for those few moments that he was a pariah.

“You know nothing,” Harry’s voice was low hiss. “You are talking about the man who was brave enough to put himself between Voldemort and his best friend. Any of you here willing to do the same? Any of you willing to stand up and be counted in the fight? Hell, I’ll make it easy for you, any of you willing to stand between this man and what I’m about to do to him?”

Sirius had got his eyes open by then, and wasn’t surprised to find the whole pub was frozen. These people hadn’t a Hogwarts education, had probably never drawn a wand in anger in their lives. A brawl was one thing, wandwork quite another. And Harry held that wand with way too much familiarity for a born-Muggle.

Sirius was frozen himself, that was from pure shock. Nobody had defended him before. He couldn’t expect James to, of course, but he had thought that maybe – but no, nobody had, not until his alley cat.

Who was stalking Turner down.

“Harry, stop.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything unforgivable. I think I’ll start with Lacerastis, Voldemort likes that one, doesn’t he? It’s not even that painful, relatively speaking. Bit like being tickled with skewers.”

That was a frighteningly accurate description of the curse. Sirius had to swallow down the need to puke at the thought of someone using it on Harry.

“Harry, please,” his voice was shaking, “please stop.”

Harry turned to him and Sirius was hopelessly grateful to see the hard look vanish.

“Oh Sirius, Sirius I’m sorry, I didn’t mean, I would never, I’m sorry.” His wand vanished back into that ridiculous pocket and he was creeping forwards with cautious steps like he excepted Sirius to bolt on him. Tentative hands fluttered towards him, as if he was unsure of his welcome.

Sirius caught one sturdy hand, “It’s okay, Kid. Come on now let’s get out of here.” He tugged gently and relieved when Harry followed him.
“Sirius,” Rosmerta called him quietly, and handed him a key.

“Thanks Rosie.”

“Just get him out of here.” She smiled at Harry fond and worried.

It occurred to Sirius that while Rosmerta had never actually defended him, she had never acted like he was something to be scraped off her shoe either. That she was the one who made the Three Broomsticks into something as close to home as he could hope for.

“Thanks Rosie,” he said again, his throat clogging with how inadequate those words were given what she had done for him.

She winked at him.
Chapter 7

Rosmerta sighed with relief when Harry and her favourite customer disappeared around the top of the stairs. She didn’t think Sirius had noticed, because he was such a strong Wizard in his own right, but power had been rolling off their stray in great sickening waves.

She was pretty sure Harry could have levelled The Three Broomsticks if he was of a mind to. Judging by the pin-drop silence, her customers knew it too.

“Perhaps next time you’ll listen to me when I tell you not to gossip about what you doesn’t concern you.”

The Byerson brothers picked themselves up off the floor and start loudly discussing the latest Quidditch results. Normality returned slowly in gathering chatter. Rosmerta smiled benignly and set a large glass of Ogden’s Stout before Turner, which he gulped down gratefully.

Harry was thankful that Sirius was letting him into their room. He was horrified at the way he’d lost his temper. He hadn’t meant to, hadn’t meant to do any of it, but to hear them insulting Sirius like that had been more than he could bear.

And when he heard the full appalling truth.

“My poor Sirius,” he whispered. It was worse than Azkaban, because he knew Sirius would have picked Azkaban a million times over that.

How dare Riddle force Sirius into betrayal. Harry’s hands curled into trembling fists. That was just – how dare he, how dare he hurt Sirius like that. Cold fury built inside him unlike his hot anger at the ignorant idiots downstairs. Riddle was going to pay. Harry had been planning to keep his head down and let the Order of the Feathery Menace get on with things, but no longer. He was going to find every one of that bastard’s horcruxs and crush them right in front of him. Then he was going to make Sirius a present of Riddle’s head.

Or maybe not. His vengeful thoughts screeched a sharp left. Was a head a good romantic gesture? He definitely remembered reading about people giving heads to each other in books, or talking about it at least, but he couldn’t remember if they’d been romantic presents. Harry himself would have loved to have been given Riddle’s head, particularly the last six months of the war when he had to keep slogging on and all he wanted to do was go to sleep and never wake up.

Though he supposed it wasn’t the sort of thing you could really keep, and it wouldn’t be decorative, not like flowers were. Nervous panic started his fingers twitching against his thighs. He didn’t want to mess this up. He knew from Hermione the most important thing was research. He needed to study his courting book. Figure out what counted as romantic. He knew about flowers and chocolates of course but they were rather ordinary for someone as splendid as Sirius.

And he was already messing things up. He gone and lost his temper. He hadn’t lost his temper in years. Of course he hadn’t had anything to really lose his temper about, it had all been same shit different day. Frankly Harry had been too exhausted to keep losing his temper. Now it was like his temper had woken up and was furious at being ignored for so long.
Harry scowled, his temper was just going to have to lump it. It was not getting out and scaring Sirius away and that was just the way things were going to be.

Sirius was so busy getting Harry to the privacy of their room and worrying about how exactly Harry knew which spells Voldemort liked to torture people with, that he didn’t realise at first that Harry was being gentle with him.

In fact he didn’t realise until he was sitting on the bed with Harry hovering anxiously over him.

“Can I go get someone for you? Would you like a glass of firewhiskey? No wait Hermione said it doesn’t really help, or is that only with hypothermia? Are you sure I can’t fetch somebody for you?”

“Harry, stop.”

Harry winced and dropped down into a crouch. “I’m not going to hurt you,” he promised, looking up at him earnestly. “I’d never hurt you.”

Sirius blinked and coughed to disguise an inappropriate giggle when it dawned on him that Harry thought he was afraid of him. Sirius wasn’t quite the idiot he’d been in his sixth year when he declared that he wasn’t afraid of anything (he’d been lying even then, James had been too kind to call him on it) but it had certainly never occurred to him to be afraid of a half-trained born-Muggle.

“Harry, it’s okay. You lost your temper, believe me I get that. It’s not the end of world.”

“You don’t understand. I break things.”

Sirius had a sudden flash of what growing up in the fragile Muggle world must have been like for a kid with enough magical power to have breezed through Hogwarts.

“Oh kid, come here.” Sirius leaned down to pull Harry in close. “The Muggle world is too delicate for magic. If our Muggle-born students get through Hogwarts without needing a clean-up squad more than once or twice, they’re lucky. Believe me in the magical world we can, I can, take anything you can dish out.”

Harry started to laugh, and Sirius could hear the broken edges grinding together underneath. He tightened his grip on Harry’s shoulder.

“I should be comforting you,” said Harry between hiccuppy giggles. “Sirius I am so, so sorry. I just, god, it must have been awful, still be awful.”

Guilt oozed through Sirius. Harry had coiled himself around his legs and was hugging him hard, like he was trying to hold him together.

“Harry, don’t say that, I don’t deserve –”

“Shut up. You do. I know you did everything humanely possible. More than anybody else could have done.”

Sirius cringed at the passionate belief in Harry’s eyes. He didn’t deserve this. “You don’t understand,” he said helplessly, because he couldn’t explain and Harry’s sympathy and support were making him feel lower than dirt. “I’m not worried about me, I’m fine. I’m worried about you. You shouldn’t be able describe how Voldemort likes to torture people.”
Harry grinned up at him, his eyes very dark, “You shouldn’t have recognised my description.”

Sirius let his head drop forward, he officially had no idea what to say. Voldemort didn’t like to use Cruciatius because the fun ended too fast. He would give a lot not to know that; he’d give more for Harry not to know that.

He wondered if Harry had nights where woke to sound of that low slithery voice whispering in his ear, *Cruciatus is such a blunt, impersonal instrument. We’re going to get to know each other much better than that. But don’t worry about missing out, if you beg pretty enough, I’ll use it to put you out your misery.*

Voldemort probably hadn’t wanted information from Harry though, and somehow that was worse, because Sirius had always that out. Harry would have had no such escape. And Sirius’ own nightmare was fourteen years in the past, Harry’s must be far more recent. Now he had a whole new reason to hate Voldemort because if the bastard had just died, Sirius’ alley cat would have been safe.

Steeling himself, he faced Harry squarely, “Do you want to talk about it?” He hoped his reluctance wasn’t obvious. Lily said talking about things was important and she was usually right about that sort of stuff. Just because Sirius would rather punch walls didn’t mean he should deprive Harry of the chance.

“Uh.” Harry shifted uncomfortably. “Did you want to talk about it?”

“Um,” said Sirius.

“You want to skip talking and go straight for therapeutic sex?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Hell yeah.”

Harry lurched up and pressed his mouth to Sirius’ lips to seal the deal. He didn’t want to risk any more conversation about his lost hours, even Hermione had eventually learnt to shut the fuck up about them. Sex was a much better option and Harry was all for it – except that remembering those lost hours cold, naked and hurt, he couldn’t bear to even loosen the fly of his jeans.

He guessed Sirius felt the same way, because Sirius shivered and slid down off the bed tucking himself under Harry’s arm and pulling his legs in tight against his chest. Reaching up, Harry tugged on the eiderdown until it slithered off the bed and flopped over them. He wrapped the edges around Sirius’ shoulders and Sirius rubbed the side of his cheek against Harry’s chest in thanks.

Harry growled, hating that Sirius had his own lost hours. He wondered if Voldemort had done that thing –

Pulling back, he tilted his head, studying Sirius’ face for the faint scars he knew from his own mirror.

Finding them, he moaned softly, and gently brushed his lips against them.

Sirius’ breath left him a low hiss and he caught Harry’s hand in both of his to kiss each finger joint and it was almost as if he was healing those long ago breaks.

When he reached Harry’s wrist he kissed the delicate joint and then pressed it mournfully against his the side of his throat. Harry gently tugged free so he could smooth the flat of his hands over Sirius’ chest and ribs.
“Wish I’d been there,” he muttered.

“Glad you weren’t,” said Sirius, “wish I’d been there for you, wish I’d just done the job right in the first place. Merlin, Harry, I am so, so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” said Harry fiercely.

Sirius shifted uneasily. He had put a lot of effort over the years into not thinking about that night. And if the memories were sometimes more present than he’d like, well he’d also put a lot of effort into perfecting his masks. James was the only one he could have talked to about it, and that was obviously right out.

It was fine. He was fine. But this unlooked for understanding was upsetting the fragile balance he’d painstakingly created for himself. And Harry giving him what nobody else had, absolution – Sirius was completely overloaded. He didn’t understand why Harry was being so gentle with him. The kind careful touches were shaking him more than punches ever had. His skin felt all wrong on his body.

“Please don’t freak out,” he whispered. And then his body bucked and twisted into Padfoot because dogs were built to take affection.

He shook out his fur and wuffled softly. Harry’s body had gone tense in surprise. Padfoot whined imploringly and nosed gently at his hands.

Harry wasn’t sure what to expect when Sirius begged him not to freak out with huge entreating eyes, but then the man vanished into a huge black dog.

“Oh,” said Harry, “Snuffles.”

He had missed Snuffles too. It was easier somehow with Snuffles. He flung his arms around the dog’s neck and fist his hands into thick black fur. Snuffles barked high and happy and bumped his head against Harry’s. Harry pressed his face into the soft fur and hung on.

“Snuffles,” he said again, sitting up a little. He got a great sloppy lick in response, and then Snuffles pulled away to hurtle around the room, claws clattering on the floorboards, tail wagging his whole body.

Harry leaned back against the bed and just watched, feeling soft and fond.

Eventually the excited dog calmed down enough to approach, dropping down on his front paws while his open mouth panted in a doggy grin. With a giant pounce he landed by Harry, teeth clamping down on the sleeve of his sweater. He worried at it, growling as ferociously as a dog can while its tail still waves jauntily.

“You crazy thing,” Harry wrapped his arms around the dog and rolled them both over. They batted at each other with hands and paws, Harry laughing and Snuffles barking with delight.

Finally Snuffles broke away to race around the room again before piling into a heap at Harry’s side, head resting on his thigh, cold wet nose pressed to the thin skin of his wrist. Harry swiped at his wet eyes and petted the dark shaggy head.
They sat like that for a long time.
The grumpy squawk of an owl woke Padfoot from his light doze and he sat up, turning back into Sirius as he did so. Hedwig was winging her way towards him with a militant look in her beady eyes, a small parcel dangling from her talons. He poked Harry to warn him,

“Incoming.”

Harry rubbed sleepily at his face and smiled up at the owl,

“Hey there girl.” He held out his hand and Hedwig actually condescended to land on his shoulder and preen his hair, which was a high honour from an owl who hated everyone except her owner. Sirius hooked the parcel off her leg and opened it cautiously. Predictably it exploded in a puff of red and gold to reveal a red gingham table cloth, a large plate of sandwiches and a second plate loaded with four wedges of fruit cake. There was a notecard included and Harry’s quick fingers snagged it before Sirius could.

“I told you to eat something, you stupid mutt,” Harry read out in a puzzled tone.

Sirius coughed, “I have weird friends,” he apologized, “make good cake though.” He reached for slice and the plate grew a hand and slapped his fingers. The note card changed to, Bad dog, no pudding before main. He rubbed his insulted hand,

“And they nag like hell.”

“You have weird friends.”

Sirius sighed and shook his head over his weird friends. He grabbed the card and a ballpoint from his pocket and scrawled on the back, I’m with someone you crazy people, and now he thinks I’m crazy too. Then gave the card to Hedwig, who took it with a slightly less disdainful snap of her beak than normal, and flew off.

“Here,” he passed the plate of sandwiches to Harry, “might as well eat.”

Harry looked at the sandwiches with suspicion, they were the good sort that needed two hands and a firm squish before you could attempt to pick them up. They tasted amazing.

“These are really good,” said Harry licking his sticky thumb and thinking about Sirius’ weird friends who sent him tasty sandwiches but weren’t around to thump loud-mothed idiots quiet.

“Excellent, have another. You look like you’ve missed one too many meals.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders, “Wasn’t very hungry.” Between the strangers who scrutinized everything he ate (sometimes they’d come up and ask him what he was eating. If Ron was there he’d make up the most outlandish names he could think of. Harry was too tired to bother) and the House Elves fighting over the right to make him elaborate over-sauced dishes, Harry usually only poked at the food on his plate and ate half a muggle meal bar back in the privacy of his room.

Sirius pushed the plate closer to him.
“Have you had any?” Harry checked, because Sirius’ friends might be weird but they also might have a point.

“Touché. How about we both have one?” Sirius tapped the plate with the tips of his fingers and another plate popped up. Taking a sandwich Sirius put it on the second plate and sat back to look at it. Harry didn’t think Sirius entirely understood eating. He took another sandwich himself and took a bite to demonstrate how it was done.

He tried to think of something witty and amusing to say to make Sirius like him. Harry wasn’t very good at convincing people to like him. Finally he defaulted to his standard question,

“So what do you do?”

“Huh?” Sirius stopped staring at his sandwich. “Oh. I’m a Professor at Hogwarts. Advanced Arthimancy.” He had given up on his sandwich entirely and was slowly pulling it apart and sorting each ingredient into its own pile with a frown on his face.

“Do you not like it?” Harry asked, prepared to take offence on his behalf. He would very much not mind blowing up a classroom or two.

“It’s a job. It stops me from drinking myself to death.” He broke off, flinging his arms out, the sleeves of his robe dropping over his hands. “Ignore me. It’s not that bad. I’m just in a bad mood. My favourite student came back a few days before school starts. He didn’t have a good summer.”

“Favourite student?”

“Neville. Poor boy. Even his name is against him.”

Neville. Neville. The jealousy that roared through Harry at Neville being Sirius favourite student was so hot and fierce he rubbed at his arms to see if he scorched off the hair. Neville. Harry took a breath and reminded himself he liked Neville. Besides he didn’t want to be Sirius’ favourite student, he wanted to be Sirius’ favourite full stop.

Then it occurred to him to wonder why Neville was still a student. Harry had, well he hadn’t graduated Hogwarts, but if he had it would have been last summer.

“What year is he in?”

“Just coming up to fifth year.”

Harry chewed thoughtfully on the edge of his thumb. It seemed like he’d gone back in time as he’d jumped universes. That would explain why Riddle was still around. And if this universe’s Harry Potter was dead, Neville must be the prophesised one. Merlin. Abruptly Harry decided he no longer begrudged Neville being Sirius’ favourite student. If Neville got shafted with the prophecy, he deserved to have Sirius in his corner.

“Did he have a very bad summer?” he asked sympathetically. Harry had a lot of bad memories of summer.

“They’re –” Sirius shoved his plate away and stood up to stalk about the room. “They’re destroying him trying to turn him into someone who can fight you-know-who. There’s a – Merlin, I probably shouldn’t be telling you this but what the hell, it isn’t as if the rumours aren’t all over Hogsmeade anyway because Merlin forbid anyone keep their mouths shut – there’s a prophecy. About how you-know-who will be destroyed. And it looks like Neville drew the short straw. He’s fifteen! And they expect him to fight you-know-who. It’s obscene.”
“But if he is the prophesied one?” Harry asked, confused by Sirius’ anger. It had always been an accepted fact that Harry would be the one to fight Riddle. Just his bad luck, no hard feelings.

“So what. Who cares if he’s the prophesied one – if he even is the prophesied one because prophecies are always tricksy bastards until they turn out. He is fifteen years old. You do not train a child to fight a dark lord. I don’t know how they can stand to live in their own skins.”

“But,” Harry’s brain felt slow and stupid, like he was stumbling after a concept he couldn’t see, “if he is the prophesied one, they don’t have any choice.” That was true, right. That had to be true.

“There’s always a choice,” roared Sirius. “They could fight you-know-who right now. Maybe they couldn’t kill him but they could make a start. They could get rid of his followers. They could imprison him. Merlin, they could transfigure him into a coffee table. Anything would be better than sitting around on their hands waiting for Neville to turn seventeen and do their job for them. What sort of plan is that? He was a baby.”

Harry stared at Sirius, woozily aware his breathing had gone a bit funny. “So,” he stammered, his dry throat clicking in protest, “so you don’t think it’s right to expect someone to fight a dark lord just because there’s prophecy?”

“Of course not. It’s inhumane. And also stupid. If you know anything about prophecy, you know relying on them is the most dangerously idiotic thing one can do. If that fraud up at the castle actually taught anything, everyone would know that.”

Harry was having a hard time turning the words Sirius was speaking into sentences with meaning. The change in the conception of the world was too big for him to understand all at once. The Sirius in the other universe had never expressed such a sentiment, but then would he have chance to speak to Harry like that. Dumbledore had kept him too far out on the ragged edge.

“So I,” Harry’s fracturing brain caught itself just in time, “Neville shouldn’t have to fight the dark lord.”

“Precisely.” Sirius shook his head, running his hands through his hair. “Sorry, I shouldn’t shout. It just makes me so angry. It’s not right. He’s just a boy. It’s not his job.”

Harry nodded dumbly. Deep down inside him an anger, so long unacknowledged that he’d forgotten it, was stirring into life. He’d been just a boy. It wasn’t his job. It wasn’t right. Dizzy, Harry dropped to the floor clenching his head. It felt like it was about to split apart, worse even than the aftermath of Snape’s bludgeoning occulmency.

“Harry?” Sirius was asking. He sounded worried. Harry wanted to reassure him. But the rage burning inside him was a living thing. It was like fighting Riddle’s possession, except this time Harry wanted to give it to it. He wanted to let it burn down the whole world. His body shook and his hands clenched into trembling fists.

Movement in his peripheral vision, then someone was crouching in front of him. The rage focused down into one blazing point of white light and he raised his fist to strike.

“Harry.” The voice was soft and the hand that caught his fist was careful. “Harry.”

Sirius. That was Sirius.

“Oh Harry love, I’m sorry. I should have thought. Of course you weren’t ready to talk about you-know-who. You can barely just have got away from him. I’m sorry. Here, it’s alright, easy now. I’ll never let anything hurt you. Easy now.”
Gentle fingers stroked the straining tendons in his wrist and almost without his permission his hand uncurled.

“Love, your nails have dug right into your palms.” Sirius pressed a kiss to the small hurts, as if they mattered.

And Harry was suddenly floating above his pain and rage. He mattered to Sirius. Sirius had been angry. Sirius had been furious at the idea of a baby being stuck as the prophesised one. Harry could be angry too. He wasn’t wrong. He wasn’t selfish. He was allowed to be angry. Somehow that permission made it easier to let the anger go.

“There we are,” praised Sirius. “That’s it. Come on now, Harry love.”

Sirius. He had loved Sirius before but after hearing his angry defence of prophecy children and it almost overpowering, the great flood of it washing him clean and suddenly Harry was back in the small room above the Three Broomsticks, Sirius crouched at his side, handsome face watching him with anxious grey eyes.

“Sirius,” Harry gasped with relief and clutched for him.

“That’s better,” said Sirius. “Do you think you can make it to bed?”

Harry balked, “No stay.”

“Ah Harry I’m sorry, I promise I’ll stay.” He urged Harry to his feet and they stumbled together onto the bed. Harry wrapped himself tightly around Sirius and buried his face against his neck.

“Harry, you need to let me have an arm free.”

“No,” said Harry, hanging on tighter.

“Love, I need an arm free.”

Grumpily Harry let him go. Sirius stretched out his arm, muttered under his breath, and the eiderdown flumped up and settled around them cosily.

Harry hummed happily.

“Feeling better?”

He nodded sleepily. He felt exhausted, tiredness pressing in all sides.

“Good. I am sorry Harry.”

With a great effort he managed to blink his eyes open, “Nuh, uh,” he told Sirius sternly, “you have nothin’ to be sorry for. Even more amazing. Gonna make everyone understand, I promise. Gonna make you so happy.”

Sirius laughed softly, “Oh Harry. I’m a lost cause. I won’t be dragging you down with me. Don’t worry about it.”

Too tired for coherent argument, Harry snorted and snuggled closer.

“It would be nice though, if things were different,” Sirius sighed. Harry smiled against Sirius’ skin as he drifted into sleep. He was going to make things so very, very different.
Chapter 9

Sirius woke up momentarily confused about why he’d gone to bed fully-dressed, he wasn’t usually that bad. Then he remember and, oh, Harry had gone. Guess he deserved that. He’d managed to scare the kid into a panic attack yesterday yammering on about you-know-who. The Order’s treatment of Neville infuriated him but that wasn’t any reason to shout at poor Harry about it. And Harry caught by the monster too, that was… just another consequence of Sirius’ greatest failure.

Sirius huddled in on himself and tried to remember how to breathe.

Harry had gone. Which was fair enough. Sirius had been the one who’d abandoned him first, sneaking out in the middle of the night. Waking up alone was definitely deserved. Whining to himself as if he was Padfoot, he banged his head repetitively against the mattress until things felt a little more manageable.

Harry was still gone though.

Sirius clutched his own arms tight. It was fine, he’d get up in a minute or two, for now he’d just concentrate on breathing.

The crash of the door slamming open and the clatter of someone entering the room slammed him out of his grey haze. Sirius yanked himself up even as his stiff joints creaked in protest. The intruder was accompanied by the strong smell of bacon and Sirius licked his lips chasing the hot salty taste.

“You’re awake.” Harry bounced over, plates bobbing along behind him like a small flotilla in his wake. “Good morning.”

He wrapped his arms around Sirius and dropped them both back onto the bed, they rebounded once and Harry jostled them closer. Sirius was going to comment on all the revolting youthful energy – Merlin, he was only thirty-five, he shouldn’t feel this old – but instead he gasped,

“Harry, your hands are like ice, don’t you know any warming charms?”

Immediately he felt bad, because maybe Harry didn’t know any warming charms, even if it was one of the practical charms nearly every Wizard and Witch learnt.

Harry shrugged his shoulders as if he wasn’t bothered. Sirius recognized the gesture and hoped he was more convincing when he tried it.

“I know warming charms; and I tend to set things on fire when I cast them.” Harry ducked his head and chuckled nastily, “Even when I do magic, I’m a freak.”

Sirius pulled him close, “Oh kid, you’re not a freak. Me and James had the exact same problem.”

“Really?” Harry looked up, his normally wary face unguarded and nakedly hopeful.

“Really truly.” He pressed a kiss to one of the icy hands. “I promise.”

Harry drew his wand and conducted the still hovering plates into a neat stack on the bedside table, then turned to Sirius,
“Show me please,” he begged.

“It’s the flick of the wrist, it’s too easy to put too much power into it. Instead you need to gently roll the wrist forward. Like this.” He demonstrated the movement, then wrapped his own hand around Harry’s to help him with motion.

Harry hmmed thoughtfully, then aimed his wand at a pillow and repeated the motion. Sirius grabbed the pillow, now as toasty as a hot water bottle, and held it out. With slow caution, Harry rested the tips of his fingers against it, then, once he was reassured it was neither on fire or a block of ice, let his whole hand sink in to soak up the warmth.

“It worked!”

“See, you only needed to tone it down a little. And you figured it out first time. I set fire to three different robes practicing, and James set fire to the bed curtains.”

Harry laughed, “The bed curtains?”

“Yes. We had to serve detention for it too.”

“That’s not fair. You were trying to practice.”

“Our reputations were against us. We never could get anyone to believe us about the warming charms.” Sirius smacked his head lightly against his hand. A thought occurred to him. “Do you have the same problem with cooling charms?”

Harry’s shoulders hunched up, “I knocked someone over once,” he confessed in a whisper.

“I knocked all the plates off the dinner table. And James, that’s my best friend, James he tried to cool his soup one day,” Sirius laughed, “and blew all the soup out of the bowl in this great wave that splatted straight into Lily, the girl he’d fancied for ages. I have never heard such an ear-splitting shriek. Lily was pretty loud too.”

Harry curled in on himself as he laughed, like it was a secret he was trying to keep. Sirius wanted to kill everyone who had ever hurt him. He nudged up against him,

“So it’s the same idea. Roll don’t flick.”

Face furrowed with concentration, Harry immediately tried the charm. A cool breeze wafted across the room. Sirius shivered as his skin prickled.

“Well done. I don’t know how you were missed. The muggle-born detection wards should have been yelling about you. I have no idea what to do for the best,” Sirius tugged at his hair. “You’re old for an apprenticeship, they usually start when you’re fourteen or fifteen, and I’m not sure one would suit you either.”

Harry looked thoughtful, “I don’t do well with people ordering me around.”

“Hadn’t thought that about you at all,” said Sirius, and laughed when Harry pulled away before relaxing again when he realized he was being teased. “Harry love, that’s always been obvious. It’s why we get on so well. Not sure I could find anyone to take you on anyway, and if they were stupid enough to agree, you wouldn’t want them training you. How old are you exactly?”
Harry had already thought about the answer to that question.

“Nineteen,” he said without hesitation. It was more or less true. He’d been eighteen when he left that other universe in May, and now it was September. That made him nineteen, kind of.

“Could be worse. When’s your birthday?”

Distracted by his achievement at dragging his age another year closer to Sirius’ – he might love the casual affection in Sirius’ voice when he called him kid, but he didn’t want Sirius thinking he was one – Harry answered without thought and,

“Halloween,” popped out of his mouth before he could stop it. Halloween was when everything started for him. It was the one anniversary he couldn’t get away from. And back when he had been the boy in the cupboard, it had been the one day of the year that actually was like a celebration for him. The Dursleys would rather have cleaned their own house than admit Harry had a birthday let alone celebrate it. Halloween though, Dudley had latched onto the idea of Halloween chocolate and insisted on so many treats, that it gave Harry the chance to snitch a few. Halloween had been his favourite holiday before he found out.

Halloween felt more true than his stupid late July birthday that only cursed him with the prophecy.

“Halloween,” he said again more confidently.

“Soon then. We’ll have to do something to celebrate.”

“Yeah,” said Harry as casually as he could when he really wanted to say please, please. A whole birthday just for him, no Riddle hanging over him.

“Done.” Sirius gaze turned inward, obviously plotting. Why was Sirius so nice to him.

“Stop being so nice to me. Get back into bed. I’m being nice to you. I brought breakfast in bed. So get back in bed right now.” No, that didn’t sound right, scolding Sirius was not part of his plan. “I mean, please get back in bed.” Fortunately Sirius didn’t seem to mind, he was laughing as he plumped a pillow up against the headboard then sat down and pulled the eiderdown over his lap.

“So, I’m here, but I think breakfast in bed is supposed to be more of a shared endeavour.”

“Oh right.” Harry scrambled into bed beside Sirius. He beckoned the plates over to him and began to settle them neatly on their knees. Sirius snuck a piece of bacon runny with butter and ketchup and ate it quickly before it could drip. Licking his fingers, he said,

“This is great Harry, thank you.”

It was great. Harry hadn’t really expected that. He just knew breakfast in bed was a thing you did. But this was great. They were cosy and warm and together. Sirius was eating, and it was food Harry cooked for him. And it was all really great.

Harry took a big bite of his bacon sandwich before he could say something stupid.

Sirius ate his bacon sandwich, and it was great. The bacon was lovely and crispy, the bread fluffy and well dosed with butter and ketchup, but best of all was Harry’s obvious pride in having supplied him with a great sandwich. The kid was positively beaming and Sirius felt warm all over, and kind of shy, that somebody could be so happy at doing something nice for him.
Then he noticed the angle of light through the window and realized what time it must be.

Harry nearly cursed out loud in annoyance when Sirius sighed and dropped his half-eaten sandwich back onto the plate, all the happiness draining out of him.

“Well back to work,” he said, pushing the plate away.

“But school doesn’t start till Thursday,” Harry protested.

“Which means they’ve only got two days to fit in all their digs and snide comments before they have to start pretending for the students. Damn that sounded grumpy. Ignore me. I don’t know why but this year seems to be hitting harder than normal.”

“This year is worse?”

“Yeah, I thought maybe, but no, it’s going to be just the same as always. And it’s fine, it’s all fine, but that night I met you I was just – but hey, I met you, it’s all good.”

Harry was thinking rapidly, “Did you get bad news that day?”

“Not really, oh well, I found out this year wasn’t going to change anything after all. I guess you could say it was bad news.”

“Not long before you came to the Three Broomsticks?”

“Where else would you go after getting bad news.”

“Huh.” His jump across the universes had been focused on a Sirius. A Sirius he was going to find before the Wizarding World tore him to shreds of himself. Harry would bet he arrived just at that moment Sirius was handed his bad news. That would explain the strange time jump. His hands curled into fists.

“Harry?”

He refocused on the really important stuff, “It’s not that late. Have some more food.” Sirius hadn’t eaten anything last night. Harry obviously had a lot to fix. “I am going to make things so much better,” he muttered, as he passed Sirius the piled high plate.

“Silly,” Sirius nestled in close against him, “you already have.”
Chapter 10

Harry was feeling very proud of himself. Sirius had actually eaten two more sandwiches before he put the plate down again,

“Now I really have to go.”

“Are you sure?” Harry wheedled.

“Yeah sorry,” he cupped his hand against the side of Harry’s face. “Someone has to keep an eye on the idiots. Who knows what might happen otherwise.”

Harry found that hard to argue with. Somebody did need to keep an eye on the Order of Burnt Feathers. He didn’t know why he’d thought he could leave dispatching Riddle to them, they were far too likely too muff it, had been muffing it for years. Keeping a low profile was still a priority but he wasn’t going to let Riddle hurt Sirius again.

Besides it wasn’t fair for Madam Rosmerta to be so scared and wary. And Hogsmeade shouldn’t be so shabby and locked-down. Back in the other universe it hadn’t bothered Harry, to be honest he hadn’t noticed with the way everything else was sliding sideways, but the change from the bright cheerful place Hogsmeade had rebuilt itself into was so abrupt it was startling and he didn’t like it.

“Allright,” he agreed sulkily. “But you have to promise to eat lunch.”

“You are a terrible nag.” Sirius kissed him full on the lips. “You are going to get on so well with my friends.”

Beaming, Harry watched Sirius waltz right out the room, before it occurred to him Sirius had made no promises about lunch. He chased down the back stairs and into the kitchen after him, nearly running straight into Madam Rosmerta who’d popped in from the bar to say good morning.

She clasped her hands to her chest, “Ooh, la, la, you’re looking better this morning,” and then she swooped down to give them each a kiss on the cheek. Sirius slung an arm around her waist and picked her up spinning her around in a circle.

“Well I’m in a good mood,” he said as he set her back on her feet.

She thwacked him with her tea towel, “Why Mr Black, whatever has come over you,” she asked, in a voice that had turned high-pitched and affected.

“Cousin Cissy is that you,” said Sirius and got thwacked with a tea towel again. “Good morning to you too, Rosie.”

“And what a very good morning it is. Now don’t you dare stay too long at that wretched place. We’re expecting you for dinner at the latest, right Harry?”

Harry was stuck between insisting Sirius could do whatever the hell he wanted, and his complete agreement with Rosmerta. In the pause, Sirius sighed,

“I’ll try.”

“You do that.” She hugged him again.
“Merlin, calm down woman, I’m not going off to war.”

“Hah,” said Rosmerta, then her head turned sharply, “the sausages are burning,” and she hurried across to the grill to jolt the turning charm into action.

“I need to do stuff,” Harry edged reluctantly towards the cooker where the mushrooms were looking distinctly done.

“Then go do stuff, I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yeah.”

They stood there a little longer looking at each other. The saucepan began to rattle with annoyance.

“Uh,” Harry abortively moved to grab it but was dragged back by the look in Sirius’ eyes.

“You should get that.”

“Uh huh.”

Sirius took a step towards the door, then turned back, “You’ll still be here, right? You’re not going anywhere.”

“Not going anywhere,” Harry agreed with a firm nod of his head.

The angry rattling grew louder, the saucepan was now trying to edge off the burner.

“Go,” said Sirius, contradorarily placing one hand flat against Harry’s chest, looking up at him with big grey eyes. Harry leaned forward and kissed him.

“Be careful,” he muttered.

“You too.”

The saucepan screeched in fury and Harry had to dive to catch it before it took a header off the stovetop. As he juggled the pan to avoid burning himself on the hot metal, Sirius vanished out the door.

“Bye Sirius,” he called after him. “And you can shut it,” he told the saucepan as it tried to whack him on the fingers with its handle.

“Harry,” said Rosmerta, “stop arguing with the pots and pans, and go make the coffee machine work. I swear the appliances are getting more argumentative by the hour.”

Harry had the unfortunate suspicion that was his fault, so he quickly retreated to the bar area. The coffee machine was one of those Wizarding creations where somebody had seen the muggle version and got the basic idea but completely missed the execution.

For a start it was a mess of glass flasks, pipes, and rubber tubing straight out of Alchemist’s nightmare. Instant coffee was poured into a funnel and a tap was opened to let in the appropriate amount of water as the magical fire flared into life. After the water boiled it gushed through a tangle of pipes until it mixed into coffee.

Meanwhile the appropriate chocolate –

the Wizarding World mostly used coffee as a flavouring for hot chocolate because chocolate was a
caffeine boost to your magic. The Italians drank a chopresso which was a shot of espresso and a shot of 90% cocoa chocolate and was basically undrinkable by anyone without at least a touch of non-human heritage. They were less fussed about such things on the continent which was the other reason, after rampant snobbery, that Hogwarts only recognized two magical schools in Europe. The Italians were nearly all partially descended from the Strigori, a delegation had come over to make sure Riddle was actually dead this time round but Harry thought it was mostly a corporate jolly because they didn’t do much except drink grappa all evening and then chopressos to wake up in the morning. They seemed quite interested in Harry until he convinced them he had no idea where the Resurrection Stone was and no intention of helping them find it, they went home shortly after. Harry preferred Crème Café anyway, pretty much the opposite of a chopresso, it was a cup of thick white chocolate with a faint drizzle of coffee which was basically undrinkable by anyone over the age of ten. Harry loved it.

– was added to a second flask. More cranking and bubbling and then the rich dark liquid whizzed through a coil of glass pipping before plunging down into the waiting mug.

Or that was the plan. Currently the machine was spitefully spitting out the coffee anywhere but the mug.

“That’s not clever,” Harry told it, “you keep that up, and you won’t be used at all, or worse replaced.”

The machine gurgled and spat out a gob of chocolate.

“I’m not kidding,” said Harry, “sure Madam Rosmerta can’t afford a replacement machine but a couple of extra saucepans and I can do anything you can do.”

The machine made a sad squelching sound and the mug was suddenly full of immaculate chocolatey coffee.

“That’s better,” Harry praised after he took a sip.

Another mournful squelch.

“Don’t be so down on yourself. You know I could never do it with your style.”

The machine hummed into life slooshing liquid around its pipping and letting off proud little puffs of steam.

“Exactly,” said Harry. He patted the thing encouragingly. Really it needed a proper service and some of its joints replaced but if business wasn’t good at the moment Madam Rosmerta would need to eke it out as long as she could.

Harry took another sip of his coffee and turned to look out of the bar. It was busy again, full of people ordering breakfast, and they were darting quick looks at him before diving back into talking about him with their table-mates.

Harry had lost all moral qualms about eaves-dropping back at the Dursleys, the Wizarding World just gave him more options. He tapped his ear twice and focused on a bossy, bustling woman slicing into her English breakfast with determined strikes of her knife and fork,

“I’m telling you,” she said with authority, “he’s a Rosier.”

“Have you looked at him?” demanded her friend, delicately eating a danish pastry, “he’s a Black for sure.”
“No, a Rosier, you think the Blacks let any of their squibs live long enough to have children in the Muggle world.”

“I thought McKinnon myself,” said another man laying aside his knife and fork to pontificate more thoroughly, “they claimed the family was wiped out but they could have hidden in the Muggle world.”

“I think he looks like a Potter,” said a wispy little man who was immediately shouted down.

“Could be a Malfoy,” said danish pastry woman, “if he wasn’t inducted into the family magic his hair might not have turned white.”

“Narcissa Malfoy did have beautiful dark hair before she was married,” said a man who’d been focussed on his coffee until then.

“And of course Pete remembers that.”

“She did,” protested Pete, as if he was being unfairly maligned and the rest of table laughed. “She was lovely,” Pete insisted, uncowed.

“I’m going to go and ask him,” said the first bustling woman.

“Careful Rita, Gabe Turner said he thought the kid was going to bring the whole pub down on his head.”

“Ha, I don’t scare as easy as Gabe Turner. The kid better not try anything with me.” She grabbed her coffee mug with air of going into battle. She stomped her way up to the counter and thunked the mug down in challenge.

“Can I help you?” Harry asked mildly.

She lifted her head, mouth opening as she met his eyes. She gulped, “Uh.”

“Ma’am?”

“Uh, milk chocolate coffee please.”

“Of course ma’am, I’ve just got the machine up and running again.” Harry set up the machine and patted it three times to get it going.

She was still staring at him, “Uh.”

“Can I help you with anything else, ma’am?”

She mutely shook her head.

“Alright then, here’s your coffee. I’ll add it to you tab.”

“Thank you.” She fled back to her table.

“I told you so,” said her friend with the danish pastry.

“Oh Merlin, oh Merlin,” Rita muttered. “His eyes. I’ve only see the Killing Curse once back when you know, only seen it once but I’ve never forgotten that colour. His eyes. They’re the exact colour of the Killing Curse.”
“Told you so,” said her unsympathetic friend.

“But where did he spring from,” said the pontificating man. “None of the great families have that colour eyes.”

“Obviously he’s come here to save us from you-know-who,” said Pete. That got a groan. “No, listen to me, you don’t really think that poor boy up at the castle is going save us, do you. No of course not, poor little thing’s frightened of his own shadow. Our Harry though, he’s not frightened of anything.”

The whole table turned to look at Harry. He grinned and waved; their heads all snapped back to their breakfasts.

“But why would he take up with Sirius Black then?” demanded danish pastry woman, leaning forward in a failed attempt at subtlety.

“You think Lord Black doesn’t want you-know-who gone just as much as the rest of us,” said Pete, “I always thought it was unfair blaming him the way everyone did.”

“Because you’re soft-headed when it comes to the Blacks,” said the pontificating man.

“No he’s right,” said Rita. “I mean if you-know-who asked me anything I’d tell him straight away. Wouldn’t you? Merlin, he wouldn’t even need to ask. I’d tell him everything.”

“Potter let him alone,” said Pete, “so I don’t see it’s any of our business.”

The friend shivered, “That’s true I guess. I’d sure say anything they wanted me to. Can you imagine? And Black, Lord Black, he was ill for weeks after what they did to him.”

There was a cracking sound, and Harry had to clutch after his temper before he broke all the crockery in the place. Riddle was going to pay. The coffee machine squeaked twice and there was suddenly a cup of crème café hovering at his elbow.

“Sorry,” he muttered, he hadn’t meant to worry the appliances. He took a long sip of the sweet drink and reflexively felt himself calm down. It was okay. He’d arrived in this universe in time. He was going to make things better. He ran his hand along the side of the coffee machine, “I’ll figure something out,” he promised, “we’ll get you fixed up.”

He’d lost the thread of the table’s conversation but the pontificating man was still pontificating,

“There’s nothing of the Lestranges in him. I tell you our Harry is a McKinnon. The last of the line who’s returned to avenge his family.”

That was a good story. Harry might use that one.

“A Black,” insisted Rita. “If you ignore the eyes,” she shuddered, “he has the look of the Blacks.”

“I think he’s a Potter,” said the wispy little man again. To another chorus of disapproval.

“Oh be quiet Henry,” said danish pastry woman, “I’m just glad we’re not having to rely on poor young Longbottom anymore. Bless his heart.”

That got a round of nods and approving mummers.

Harry put, Visit Neville, on the number one spot of his to do list.
Chapter 11

Harry checked in on several other conversations and found they were on similar lines. Apparently nobody was too bothered about him losing his temper last night, which was a nice change from before where any loss of temper was apparently him turning to the dark side. In fact over in the corner an elderly witch with huge spectacles and a heap of virulent pink knitting was putting up a determined argument that the show of temper was a clear indication he was a Black, and how that was a relief because say what you liked about the Blacks, as long as you got a sane one, they were remarkably effective. Look at young Sirius Black actually resisting you-know-who for three days, no one else had even come close to that.

Happily that seemed a popular opinion, several people were saying that Rosmerta had maybe had a point when she maintained it was unreasonable to expect Black to withstand you-know-who when nobody else had managed it either.

“He wasn’t even Lord Black at the time,” said an earnest young man with long skinny limbs, “just the heir. And a disowned heir at that. He’s lucky he had any magic at all.”

It would have been nice if any of them had thought to mention that sort of thing before but at least they were mentioning it now. Harry’s expectations of the Wizarding World were not high. Which just made him even more worried about Neville.

So when Rosmerta sent him out to get some fresh air after the breakfast rush was over, he walked back along the path to Hogwarts. Harry had liked Neville in that other universe, and in this universe Neville was Sirius’ favourite student, which meant it was Harry’s job to help look out for him. He figured he came well qualified. After all he had a unique understanding of the pressure that came with being the centre of a prophecy, and how it wasn’t always easy to ask your professors for help.

Walking through the gate and seeing Hogwarts in all its glory made him swallow. He had loved that castle fiercely for years. It had been home and safety – and fighting for his life. It had slowly poisoned his dreams until they rotted in his hands.

Closing his eyes, he breathed deliberately slow and steady. The panic knotting his throat eased and he was able to move past the looming dread. He wasn’t strong enough for the castle today. Turning sharply he set off to skirt his way along the edge of the Forbidden Forest. It wasn’t like he’d find Neville inside anyway if Neville had any choice at all. And he circled around to the greenhouses.

Herbology had never been his thing but from what he could pick out, they were set up in a similar way to before, so Harry headed for the Advanced Studies greenhouse, and pushed gently against the wood framed glass door.

It creaked open and from inside there came a yelp and scuffle.

“Hello,” Harry called, “is anyone in here?”

He could hear the quick panicked breaths and another scuffle. He shuffled his feet loudly as he walked deeper into the greenhouse and the heavy scent of wet soil and verdant green.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” he said, “I’ve got a bit lost.”
Predictably that convinced Neville to stop hiding behind the potting bench.

“Oh,” as he caught sight of Harry, his hunched shoulders dropped and his wary face relaxed into a smile. “Hello. I haven’t seen you before,”

Harry ground his teeth. Riddle was on the rise. In no way should it be reassuring to find a stranger instead of someone you knew. He remembered that Neville’s boggart was Snape before and wondered who it was now and if he could very accidentally murder them.

“Hi, I’m Harry, I’m a friend of Professor Black’s.”

Neville’s face brightened even more and he came forward a couple of steps, “Professor Black is really nice.”

Harry beamed at finding somebody who had the good sense to appreciate Sirius.

“And he never shouts at me for coming to the greenhouses.”

“Why would anyone shout at you for that?” It would be like shouting at Hermione for going to library. Neville was always in the greenhouses (until Augustus Rookwood stuck an axe through his chest and killed him anyway) because he was a Herbology genius and they needed everybody doing their absolute best work.

This Neville (he looked a lot better without an axe in his chest) sighed and brushed his hand over a leaf which immediately twined around his fingers.

“It’s not suitable for someone with my destiny,” he mumbled. “I’m supposed to be practicing my duelling. Or at least reading up on counter-curses.”

“But why?” asked Harry, completely stumped. This was stupid. Neville from before had been a brave fighter if pushed, but he didn’t have the reflexes and it didn’t come naturally, not like it did to Harry (axe in his chest, lungs caved in and he died choking to death on the air, mouth full of blood because he was an idiot who didn’t stay back when Harry yelled it was a trap) on the other hand Neville was the one who created the hybridized Tangleroots, a variant of the Devil’s snare that ate dark magic, and the dark magic user. Because Neville might not be a natural dueller but he was grit to the bone.

Nobody had actually wanted to use the Tangleroots to proactively attack the Death Eaters. But after Neville’s death (axe in his chest sticking out like a handle of a saucepan as wheezed and choked and tried to tell Harry it was okay because Neville was an idiot) the Tangleroots escaped the confines of Hogwarts – by which Harry meant he and Luna carefully transported them across the warded boundary one night – and proceeded to consume eighteen death eater mansions, around thirty death eaters, and most of Knockturn Alley before Riddle managed to wipe them out. It had turned the tide of the war.

Harry thought you could make a decent argument that Neville had been the prophecy child who destroyed the dark lord with the power of vegetation that he knew not. But Ron and Hermione just said he was being modest, which was ridiculous, and most everyone else seemed to think it six months determined research and exhausting development wasn’t heroic enough – because apparently stumbling around desperately for months like a punch drunk boxer before finally stamping the bastard down enough to get him to just stay dead was the epitome of heroism.

When he tried to make his case to Luna, she had nodded solemnly and then asked him if he thought that was how Neville would want to be remembered. Which obviously he wouldn’t. So Harry had
the shut the fuck up again and left Luna to promoting the Alice flower created by Neville to encourage fairies and sprites to your garden.

This Neville didn’t seem as grit-stubborn as before Neville (there was no axe, no bubbles of blood, no gulps for non-existent breath) but Harry wasn’t sure that was a bad thing because only a certain sort of someone could watch a plant slowly hook its roots through a man and consume him from the outside in. It took long enough that Harry was pretty sure they went mad before the plant was finished with them. You went a bit mad watching. Neville had never been quite the same after he’d finished testing the Tangleroots. The Lestrange brothers had definitely not been the same (as the blood dribbled down his chin Neville had maybe said that it was okay and that he deserved to die but then Neville could hardly talk and Harry wasn’t listening).

“Are you okay?” asked Neville. And Harry wanted so badly to shake him and tell him he was an idiot and he was not to die spitting blood and air and regrets. But the voice was wrong and this Neville had a warm anxious expression that before Neville had slowly had frozen out of him as the Lestrange brothers slowly went mad. And Harry hated that they had stolen one more thing from his friend. Stolen his friend.

This Neville might not be his friend but he was Sirius’ favourite student, and Harry would be damned (was already dammed) if he would let that happen to this Neville.

“I’m fine,” he said.

Neville’s face scrunched up with shrewd suspicion, “Professor Black says that all the time, I think he’s lying too.”

“I’m as fine as I can be,” Harry shook himself out of his memories. “Do you know where Professor Black is?”

“They’re having another meeting about how useless I am.”

Harry twitched. Neville be fifteen but he seemed years younger than he actually was. This wasn’t fifteen year old Neville growing into himself, this was eleven year old Neville terrified of not living up to his family’s insane expectations.

“I bet Professor Black doesn’t think you’re useless.”

Neville shook his head rapidly from side to side. “Professor Black is really nice. He sits in the greenhouse with me and explains things slowly so I understand.”

“There you go.”

“But they get cross with him. They say he shouldn’t coddle me.”

Harry twitched, “Well is it important you understand how to cast these spells?”

“Of course.”

“Then the fact that you understand when Professor Black explains is the important part.”

Neville tilted his head thoughtfully, “It’s easier to think in the greenhouse.”

“Then that’s good too. Once you have your priority everything else is secondary. It sounds like your priority is learning these spells –”
Neville nodded firmly.

“– then you should do whatever it is that helps you learn the spells.”

“So I should learn in the greenhouse?”

“What’s your priority?”

“Learning the spells.”

“So?”

“So if it helps to learn in the greenhouse, then that’s what I should do?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders because it wasn’t up to him. Neville’s eyes narrowed and for a second Harry could see a hint of an older Neville – then the door to the greenhouse slammed open and Neville’s eyes flared wide with panic.

Harry mouthed, “Go, go,” and flapped his hands at him, then turned to face whoever it was who had tracked Neville down. Behind him he heard a whispered, “thank you,” and the scrape of Neville’s shoes as he fled.

“Good morning,” said Harry loudly to cover the retreat, as he walked towards the two men. It took him a moment to recognize before Neville’s slack-faced father in the grim determined man striding towards him.

“If that boy has snuck out to the greenhouses again, I shall –”

“Now Frank calm down,” said the second man, “you can’t expect poor Neville to study all the time. And it’s not as if he’s slacking off. Herbology is hard work.”

There was something vaguely familiar about the second man’s face, like Harry was looking at stranger he already knew.

“Don’t tell him how to raise my son, Potter. Yours didn’t make his second birthday.”

“Hey,” yelped Harry, because you did not just say that to somebody. Then he realized if this was a Potter, this was James Potter. This was this universe’s version of his father.

Breathing suddenly became an issue. And Harry giggled as he remembered Neville trying breathe.

“Who the hell are you?” demanded Frank Longbottom. “What are you doing here? Where’s my son?” There was a wand in his hand.

That wasn’t good but Harry couldn’t find the energy to care. The world was narrowing down to the single point of James Potter’s face. Vaguely he thought he was going to black out any minute now. That should worry him but the idea was a relief as he whooped for air he couldn’t breathe.

“Steady Frank,” warned James Potter.

More people barged into the greenhouse.

“Have you found the infernal whelp yet?” demanded an angry voice, and that was Snape.

Harry’s body gave up its frantic struggle. Darkness smashed over him like a wave and the undertow dragged him down.
in case of confusion this chapter has a couple of people making a lot of wrong, but reasonable assumptions about what happened to Harry given they think they know that he is from the muggle world, never went to Hogwarts, and was captured and tortured by Voldemort, and do not think he's from another universe (because even in a magical au I don't think that would be anyone's first guess)

Hands had grabbed Harry, holding his body up,

“Come on kid, wake up. I’m too pretty to wind up the wrong end of disembowelment hex.”

The voice sliced past all his defences, wrapping him in utter safety and Harry couldn’t imagine it was anyone else, he slumped against him in relief. “Sirius.”

“Sorry kid but he’s coming as fast as he can. Now wake up, would you. Before he gets here and turns me into venison stew.”

Not Sirius. Harry bared his teeth and scrabbled desperately to get his head above the water.

“That’s better, c’mon. God, you’re just like him”

Harry got his eyes open and – blinked in surprise at his father.

“There you are.”

His father smiled at him.

Harry closed his eyes. He had been off-balance after seeing Neville not dying but he didn’t understand why this was hitting him so hard. His father had never been a real person to him, not truly. He was a photograph and a voice shouting for him to go, there wasn’t anything more. If he had never been real, why would his father holding him make him feel like he’d just been smacked upside the head with a bludger.

“What happened to Harry?” that was Sirius, he sounded scared.

Harry fumbled to towards him and then Sirius was catching him. He clutched at Sirius and tried to explain how everything had gone wonky and Neville was dead and his father wasn’t dead and he was never going to see Hermione or Ron again and that was awful but it didn’t make him sad and it should make him sad and nothing made sense and Hogwarts was terrifying and Neville was dead and his father wasn’t and please don’t make him go back, please don’t

“Just like you,” said his fa- James Potter.
“What?” demanded Sirius, he tucked his head close to Harry’s, “it’s okay Harry, I’ll get this sorted out. *Pax placida.*”

The darkness went soft and fuzzy. Warm and protective as when you pulled the duvet over your head, Sirius was there and everything was okay. Harry snuggled into comfy dark and let the distant voices drift over him.

“Just like you. Dead on his feet and still ready to take on the whole room. Nearly managed to curse Snape as he was passing out.”

“What did Snape do?” demanded Sirius.

“And of course that’s the part you focus on.”

“What did Snape do?”

“Nothing. Nothing to be cursed for anyway. Just sticking his nose in where it wasn’t wanted as usual, called Neville an infernal whelp.”

“But,”

“The kid was already off his stride. Frank stormed in looking for Neville but Neville had already legged it. Harry acted as the distraction. Was that your influence?”

“Maybe. I’d like to say so, but I don’t think Harry would need anyone to convince to back up a boy against an angry adult.”

“Probably. Anyway Harry already looked like you after dealing with your mother.”

Sirius’ breath hissed through his teeth and Harry swatted at the voice that had upset him.

“You two deserve each other,” said not-Sirius. Harry’s hand was caught gently and pressed against Sirius which was nice so he relaxed again into the fuzzy dark. Then Sirius rested his own hand over Harry’s and that was even better.

“So Frank waving his wand around did not help. Then Snape. He definitely knew Snape. Went for his wand.”

Harry did not remember that part at all.

“I shoved his arm down and blocked the spell. I don’t think anyone noticed except maybe Snape. And he won’t say anything.”

“How the hell do you know that? Nothing he’d like better than get someone I l-like into trouble.”

“And have people asking why Harry reacted to his voice?”

“No.”

“Denying it isn’t going to make it any less true Padfoot. If, when, you-know-who was, was… Why are there no good words for this?”

“Oh, you want a nice pretty word for torture, my apologies, Jay.”

“Alright I deserved that. When you-know-who was torturing Harry, the other death eaters would have been there. Snape wold have been there. He can pretend all he likes he isn’t involved in that
side of things, and the Order can let him get away with it, but it still won’t make it true. The Dark Revels have started again, the sort of magic build up they generate would be very similar to the way Hogwarts feels.”

“Not the same feel, but they’re both overpowering, like waiting on a thunderstorm. Or a dragon. But Hogwarts is a friendly dragon, mostly.”

“Your Harry didn’t spend seven years going to school here. I’m not sure how friendly Hogwarts would seem. And then Neville reminded him of his friend.”

“And what,” Sirius scoffed, “Frank yelling at Neville brought it all back. Come off it. Sure, I think he’s a complete tosser, but Frank’s hardly you-know-who.”

“Padfoot, you know isn’t about the actual danger. You know that. When Davey fell out that tree and screamed with surprise because he bounced, you –”

“Alright, you can shut up now. And he didn’t scream with surprise, he screamed because he’s little hellion who thought it was fun.”

“And Neville reminded him of the friend, who was almost certainly killed by the death eaters, if not you-know-who himself. So of course Snape had to stick his beak into things to complete the job. Honestly, it’s amazing Harry didn’t bring the whole greenhouse down on us.”

“My Harry is strong, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he was such a mess his magic was all over the shop but it was fierce as a cornered animal. I’m glad you got here so fast. He was babbling away about his friend who was an idiot and died because he was stupid and brave and it should have been him. He actually called his friend Neville a couple of times. Then you showed up and all he could do was beg not to be sent back.”

Sirius made a low hurt sound.

Harry’s hand flexed.

“See,” said not-Sirius. “You knocked him out with a sedative spell and he’s still trying to kill us. Can you take his wand off him before he succeeds?”

“Are you crazy, I’m not going to take his wand off him. He’s not going to hurt me anyway. There see, he’s already calming down. There we go, Harry love, that’s better isn’t it. Don’t you worry. I’m not going to let anybody hurt you.

Harry scoffed silently. That wasn’t important. The important part was Sirius not getting hurt. He felt too tired to explain though so he just hugged Sirius a little tighter so he could keep track of him.

He was beginning to get tired of the dark no matter how soft and safe it felt. It was like the pleasant apathy that had cloaked him in that other universe when nothing much had mattered. While it was peaceful, Harry had enjoyed being awake in this new universe with Sirius more. He’d just needed a break because everything had suddenly been so raw he felt like he’d been skinned alive.

“And now he’s about to fight his way past the sedative spell. You two definitely deserve each other.”

“Oh shut up.”

“Alright now I’m going to see what chaos the rest of them have unleashed. Once he’s woken up,
see if Harry’s presentable enough to make an appearance.”

“Ugh.”

“Might as well get it over with. You know Snape will be down the Three Broomsticks the first chance he gets.”

“Double ugh.”

With an effort Harry wrenched his eyes open. Not-Sirius smiled at him.

“And now he’s awake. Please don’t let him kill me.”

“Harry’s not going to kill you, you idiot.”

Harry blinked a couple of times and realized not-Sirius was James Potter. He also realized, as he looked up and up again, why only one person had guessed he was a Potter. James was **tall**. About half a foot taller than Harry with long lanky limbs.

“Yeah, he’s a giant,” glowered Sirius. “Never shuts up about it either.”

“Still bitter we aren’t all midgets, Black,” James smirked back.

“Uh,” Harry stumbled. “Sorry.” He closed his eyes again because this was not how he’d have chosen to introduce himself. There was keeping a low profile, and there was making a complete fool of yourself.

“Don’t worry about it,” said James. “I know all about stupid brave best friends.”

“Hey,” said Sirius.

“Keep an eye on him for me.”

“Hey,” said Sirius, “Of course I’m going to look after Harry.”

“I’m not talking to you, I’m talking to Harry. Now I’m going to see if the rest of them have finished yelling about stuff they can’t change. Come through when you feel up to it.”

James opened the glass door, the noise that swelled past the charms suggested the shouting had not yet stopped, and walked through. In the sudden silence after James reclosed the door, Harry realized for the first time they were in the separate section where the Venomous Daisies were kept. Sirius was looking at him, angry and solemn.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry pre-emptively.

“What?”

“I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to do any of that.”

The apologies weren’t working. Sirius was looking even angrier.

“We can have sex,” Harry offered quickly.

“What!”

“That’s, that’s a good apology, right?” he checked, suddenly nervous he had misunderstood
something. He’d been positive offering sex was a good apology, people did that all the time, make-up sex, didn’t they?

From the look on Sirius’ face they didn’t.

Sirius sighed heavily and rubbed his hands over his face. When he looked up again, all expression had been wiped clean from his face. Harry hunched up.

“Come here Harry, please,” Sirius held his hand out. They were already standing close together but Harry still had to brace himself to take that extra step. Sirius’ arm curled gently around his waist and the warmth of his body was so close, Harry relaxed into it gratefully.

“Better?” asked Sirius.

Harry nodded his head against Sirius’ neck.

“That’s good.”

“You’re not mad?” Harry whispered.

“No I’m not mad Harry. I’m not happy –”

Harry stiffened, but Sirius’ voice stayed soft. He rubbed his hand against Harry’s shoulders and pressed to a kiss to his tense jaw. The strain eased from his body and before he knew he was doing it, Harry was huddling into the affection.

“– not happy that you felt you had to apologise for getting upset, and I’m extremely unhappy you thought you had to placate me with sex, but I’m not mad.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologise. I clearly need to go hex more than a few people but none of it is your fault.”

“Everybody gets mad when I lose my temper.”

“You didn’t lose your temper, you lost yourself for a bit, but that’s okay I’ll always find you again. And even if you did lose your temper, no matter, that’s what punching walls is for after all.”

Harry laughed.

“That’s better,” Sirius’ voice had lost its solemn edge and sounded happier. Harry risked lifting his head from where he was hiding his face against Sirius shoulder.

Sirius smiled at him, “There you are. It’s okay Harry love. I promise.”

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you in front of your friends.”

“They’re not my friends, and you didn’t.”

Harry wasn’t convinced but he wasn’t up to arguing right then.

“I’m the one who needs to apologise because I shouldn’t ask you about this now, you should have time to get your balance back and this is a fire-whiskey kind of conversation, but the bastard isn’t going to give us the time. So I’m just going to ask and hope you forgive me.”
“Huh.”

“The man who came charging in, James thought you recognized him. Long dark greasy hair and beak of a nose. Snape.”

They were standing too close for Harry to hide the whip-crack of tension through his body.

“Yeah, that’s what James thought. Well Snape, he is a death eater, signed up dark-marked and everything, but he repented when he found out someone he liked was threatened by you-know-who. He’s worked as a spy for Dumbledore ever since.” Sirius ran his hand through his hair,

“I, well I don’t think I’m entitled to have an opinion on him, but it can’t be denied that anyone betraying you-know-who has to have balls of steel.”

Harry’s head bobbedled in maybe agreement.

Sirius sighed, “Yeah I’m with you there. But he is a spy, he has to stay undercover. We are at war, even if no one wants to call it that. So it would probably be best if you don’t take his head off his shoulders.”

Harry would accept that – Snape had hated his father, probably justifiably, and hated him by proxy and that was all fine – but at the same time,

“Neville,” because Neville hadn’t deserved to suffer Snape’s bile, then he remembered he wasn’t in that universe anymore, “I mean, not Neville, I mean,” his words tangled up because he had no idea how to explain.

“Hush, James figured it out. Your friend who was like Neville, the death eaters killed him, is that right?”

Harry didn’t want to lie, but he had no way to produce his Neville, and it was mostly true, so he bit his lip and nodded.

“I’m sorry, Harry.” Sirius took his hand and Harry gripped it hard.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

DADA Professors in this universe (because Harry isn't interested enough to track down the differences and there's no easy way to mention it)

1st year - Quirrell (It went differently but still badly)
2nd year - Alice Longbottom. (Lockhart fled to America when he realized Voldemort was back and now has a successful show in Vegas)
3rd year - Remus Lupin with Alice standing in on full moons and other days to to make the full moon thing a bit less obvious
4th year - responsibility was split. Alice finally convinced everyone involved that Snape wasn't suited to teaching the younger years. She took years 1-3 potions, Remus took 1-3 DADA and Snape took 4-7 in both Potions and DADA. (Moody was already helping train Neville and working with the Aurors as Voldemort was back.)
5th year - ......

Sirius stood with Harry for a silent minute, and then Harry stepped back and shook the memories away.

“I’m okay.”

“Uh huh,” Sirius knew that type of okay personally. “So are you going to kill Snape? Because you should probably do it without witnesses.”

“It’s okay. He’s a spy. He has to play a role.”

Harry looked about as convinced by that as Sirius was. He knew he was hopelessly biased about Snape but he could not make himself like the man. They’d been shits to the man back at school, but that didn’t give you a pass to be shit to everyone else for the rest of your life.

And rejecting you-know-who only got you so many points when you’d joined him willingly in the first place. Snape’s father hadn’t even been a Wizard. When Sirius thought of those of his school mates, and worse in recent years his students, forced into service by their families, he wanted to punch Snape in the face. And if he thought about Reg –

Well best not.

“You okay?” asked Harry.

“I’m fine.”

“Uh huh.”

“So, you able to deal with Snape now? We should probably get it over with. Because I guarantee he’ll be sniffing around the Three Broomsticks tonight if we don’t.”
“Sure.”

Sirius held out his hand, Harry took it, and together they headed out into the main section of the greenhouse.

As Sirius had expected the same old argument was running again. Didn’t they ever get bored of repeating the same lines? They had agreed that the plan was to wait for Neville to get old enough to have half a chance at killing Voldemort, granted Sirius thought it was a stupid plan, but that was the plan they had agreed on, so they should shut up and accept the consequences of said plan.

Instead they spent endless time arguing over the most obvious consequence, that you-know-who would keep killing people. Charity Burbage who was supposed to be on her way back to Hogwarts for another year of teaching Muggle Studies had been found dead, her body nailed to the Ministry door in quarters, with the words painted in her blood, *Thus die all Muggle traitors*.

Sirius couldn’t say he’d liked her particularly but his world was diminished by her death. She had been a thoroughly kind, inoffensive, (despite an annoying tendency to trail off midtrain of thought, extensive waffling, and an almost irrational inability to make a decision) exasperatingly earnest woman who should have been safe in some University somewhere but had come to Hogwarts (after Marcus Campbell, the previous Muggle Studies teacher dropped the job like a hot potato and fled the country after you-know-who’s reappearance) because she wanted to bridge the gap between Muggles and Wizards and help the children outlearn their prejudices.

Really when he thought about it, Sirius was amazed she’d survived so long.

He was sorry for her death but lacked the overpowering swell of guilt because he had told her to take the offer from the Wizarding School at Bologna University. His arguments had failed, she had looked down her nose at him and said, in an unexpectedly firm voice, that she at least wasn’t going to give in to that monster and abandon her responsibilities. Stung, Sirius hadn’t been able to deal with continuing to try and persuade her. He should have ignored his hurt feelings and tried again. Some things were more important than how he felt. And okay, maybe he did feel guilty after all.

So now Frank, head of the Aurors, was yelling because Snape hadn’t warned them about the attack and what good was a spy unable to supply information. Snape was sniping about an unprepared Auror force. Moody was growling about them both needing to put more effort in. Alice was appealing that poor Charity was dead they shouldn’t be quarrelling. Shacklebolt was arguing they needed to bring the rest of Aurors more into the loop. Jones was saying they all needed to stick together in these difficult times. And Remus wasn’t saying anything because he never did.

James had apparently tried to remind everyone they were supposed to be looking for Neville. The result of which was an ongoing counterpoint argument, where Frank was insisting Neville would toughen up, Snape that the boy was useless drain on their resources, Moody that he just needed to have full authority over the boy to whip him into shape, Alice that Neville was a good boy who tried, Shacklebolt that Neville just needed to apply himself, Jones that Neville was only young he was sure to get better. And Remus wasn’t saying anything because he never did.

The two arguments were going round in circles and getting more confused as people fought both at once cutting over and under each other until Sirius wasn’t sure how they could make sense of any of it.

“Blimey,” said Harry.

“Yeah,” agreed Sirius. “Though this nothing compared to when the Weasleys are here too.”
Harry laughed.

“No, seriously. They can keep three, or sometimes four, arguments going simultaneously. And they’ll have their own Weasley argument at the same time too.”

“If you say so,” Harry grinned merrily, completely different to the shattered kid in James’ arms begging not to be sent back. Sirius squeezed Harry’s hand and silently promised that nothing and nobody was ever going to hurt Harry again.

Unfortunately at that point Snape, who’s spying had at least given him decent situational awareness, noticed them.

“Oh and here’s Black with his little floozy.”

Sirius’ anger at the sneer was completely derailed as Harry did the cutest little double-take, glancing around to try and spot said floozy. Then Harry figured out Snape was referring to him and positively beamed. His back straightened and he stepped close into Sirius’ side.

Sirius kissed him. How could he not.

“I should have expected mental impairment,” Snape snarled in frustration.

“Shut up Snape,” said Sirius without heat. It was hard to be bothered about anything with Harry grinning at his side.

“Who is this, and what is he doing here?” demanded Frank.

“Didn’t you hear,” said Snape. “It’s all over the village, Sirius Black’s muggle fling.”

“Harry is not a muggle,” said Sirius, “I’m sure Hogsmeade mentioned that.”

“As good as. No schooling, not even an apprenticeship. Even the lowliest hedge witch can boast that much.”

Harry tugged on Sirius’ sleeve, “Muggles are people without magic, right?” he asked in a loud whisper.

“Yes,” said Sirius, not sure where he was going with that but happy to back him up.

“Alright then,” Harry grabbed a plant pot off a nearby bench and turned it over in hands as he walked up to Snape, “there you go Professor, you don’t need to worry about me not having magic.”

The plant pot had become a grumpy hunched gargoyle that growled as it was shoved into Snape’s hands. Harry grinned sunnily at them all as if advanced transfiguration and animation was as easy as twirling a flowerpot a couple of times and walked back to Sirius’ side.

Silence held everyone its grip for a long moment. Snape recovered himself first,

“I don’t want this blasted thing.” He thrust his hands forward, intending to drop the gargoyle and let it smash.

“Aw, don’t be like that,” said Harry. He whistled sharply, and the falling gargoyle flapped its wings and took flight circling them twice before landing on Harry’s shoulder and picking at his hair with its beak. Harry reached up and scratched it behind the ear.

Silence grabbed them all again. This time it was James broke it,
“Well, McGonagall is going to love you.”

Frank recovered himself with a snarl, “That’s all you can say when there’s an obvious spy infiltrating the school. He’s clearly had training somewhere and is trying to hide it.”

“Yeah, and he gives it away in the first five minutes,” James shook his head. “You need to cool it Frank, you’re officially more paranoid than Moody.”

Moody shook his head, “They’re out to get us Potter, you know that better than anyone, there’s no such thing as paranoid. And there is definitely something up with that young man.”

They all looked at Harry. Who was absorbed in petting the chirping gargoyle on his shoulder.

At least that’s what it looked like. Sirius had once been an experienced prankster, he knew how to project an image of distracted innocence. Harry’s was a good performance but a little too shiningly innocent for Sirius’ inner critic, he was practically glowing with it which always made old hands like McGonagall suspicious.

Fortunately everybody here seemed fooled, except maybe Remus, who true to form didn’t say anything, and James obviously.

James raised an eyebrow and Sirius grinned back proudly.

Snape was practically frothing at the mouth, “Of course there’s something up with him, he’s attached himself to Black. It can’t be worth it even for the money.”

Harry went sharply still. The gargoyle squawked loudly.

“Oh, James warned.

“What? You’re both reckless murdering idiots. You forget I knew you in school.”

“I don’t think anyone forgets that Snape, with you reminding us all every five minutes.”

“Some people don’t know. Perhaps I should wander down to Hogsmeade and explain to this empty-headed idiot exactly what your little gang of thugs got up to and why you two should be rotting Azkaban.”

The pane of glass above Snape’s head shattered, showering him with glass shards.

“Sorry,” Harry winced. “I didn’t mean – but he shouldn’t have said that.” His face darkened and the gargoyle keened long and low.

“Don’t worry about,” said James. “Snape was always going to run into someone who wouldn’t put up with him sharpening his tongue on them, might as well be today.”

Sirius took Harry’s tense hand in both of his, “It’s okay, I’m here.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “And you are never going to that foul place.” Another couple of windows pinged.

“Harry.”

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m just worried.” Who had been telling Harry about Azkaban to provoke such a strong
reaction.

In the background Snape was blazing away about Sirius’ iniquities. Sirius had heard it all before. He didn’t feel able to counter it, they had been awful to Snape, Sirius particularly. If it made Snape feel better to retread his grievances, Sirius didn’t feel he had any right to stop him.

“Hey,” yelled James.

Snape actually shut up, because James never yelled at him. Sirius had always figured James felt much the same way about Snape as he did.

“You need to let it go Snape, for your own sake. Yes, we took it too far once your lot started graduating and things started to turn our way. We’d have had to been positive saints not to. And we weren’t saints we were fifteen year old boys, which is about as far from saints as you can get. And you weren’t a saint either Snape, no matter how you rewrite history. We can each list off the wrongs we did each other until sometime tomorrow. But it won’t change anything. It won’t fix anything. Let it go.”

“He tried to kill me,” roared Snape.

Harry’s body went stiff beside him, and Sirius had spent so long not saying so many things, that this unexpected attack suddenly loosened his tongue and temper.

“For Merlin’s sake you unspeakable idiot. If I’d wanted you dead, you would be dead. All I would have had to do was keep quiet. Everyone and their cat knew you were always sniffing around everything we did. It would have surprised nobody that you figured out a way past that door. It would have surprised nobody that you ended up dead. And nobody would ever have thought I had anything to do with it.”

Snape’s mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out, he was that taken aback.

“And if we’re going to talk about attempted murder,” James put in, “what about the time you sliced him to pieces with –”

“Let it go,” said Sirius.

“I will not let it go,” Snape had got his second wind, “you –”

“All of you! Shut it!” ordered Moody. “Are you men? Or boys still running to your mummies’ telling tales?”

Sirius choked as he tried not to laugh at the idea of running to his mother for sympathy or support or anything at all. Snape appeared to be doing a similar set of mental gymnastics.

“Humph,” snorted Moody. “Perhaps now we can move on to more important things than schoolboy grudges.”

“Schoolboy grudges,” hissed Snape. “It’s not –”

“He said, shut it, death eater,” said Frank. “You want to keep talking, get on and explain how you keep failing to provide us with any useful intelligence.”

“I told you,” Snape began.

“Oh Merlin, stop, please stop,” said Sirius. “Do not start the whole argument again, I will go
“You’re already crazy,” muttered Snape.

Sirius ignored him, “And far be it from me to take up for Snape, but you need to be reasonable Frank. You can’t expect Snape to know all the details of you-know-who’s operations, and if he did, you wouldn’t be able to use all those details or it would take the bastard about thirty seconds to work out he had a spy and who it was.”

“Of course you death eaters stick together,” snapped Frank.

“I am not a death eater,” said Sirius, pulling his sleeves up automatically because he was used to that challenge.

“The Dark Lord wouldn’t take you,” said Snape. “He likes a modicum of brains.”

Sirius honestly wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be an insult or a compliment.

“Ooh is he a zombie, that would make so much sense,” said Harry. He extended his arms, and rumbled, “B-r-a-i-n-s!” deep in the back of his throat.

Everyone with any knowledge of muggle culture laughed, even Snape although that was more of a disgusted snort.

“This is not a laughing matter.” Frank drew his wand. “Why did you bring someone you barely know to Hogwarts? How can we trust you now?”

“Hey, Hogwarts is open to everyone. I can show Harry around if I want to,” said Sirius, deciding to skip the fact Harry had shown up on his own. It would just make the explanations take longer.

“There is no reason he can’t visit Hogwarts. School isn’t even in session.”

“But Neville’s here now. Just when your muggle showed up.”

“Don’t make me thump you Frank. Harry has nothing to do with the death eaters.”

“Oh, and we’re supposed to just take your word for that. As if it means anything. Snape’s right. You should already be in Azkaban.”

Harry’s wand was in his hand as he stalked slowly towards Frank.

Sirius stared. In the back of his mind he wondered that any of them could think Harry had training when Flitwick would cry over his form. Instead of either of the two standard duelling stances, his legs were slightly bent and his balance was on the balls of his feet, his free arm guarded his face ready to attack or defend up close. Harry was ready for back alley brawling, not a duel.

The rest of Sirius’ mind was busy appreciating Harry’s absolutely lethal focus. It was hot as hell. James jabbed him in the side, “Stop drooling over your boyfriend and stop him killing Frank.”

“Do I have to?”

“Padfoot!”

Alice was saying something heart-warming but irrelevant about them all being friends and there was no need to fight. Moody was watching Harry with way too much speculation in his eyes. This was all getting out of hand.
“Harry,” Sirius called.

“I am not letting them send you to that place.”

“They’re not going to, Frank’s just spouting off.”

“That’s what you think, Black,” said Frank. “You’re both giving me due cause right now.”

At the threat to Harry, Sirius’ wand dropped into his hand, “Alice, tell your husband to stop trying to provoke us, he won’t like the results.”

Frank grinned, “Shacklebolt, you heard that, it was a clear threat.”

Shacklebolt had his wand now, but he said, “Come on Longbottom, stop pushing them.”

Moody had drawn his wand when Harry did, now he shifted into a fighting stance, “I’ll drop every one of you idiots,” he warned.

Snape drew his wand, because he’d love the chance to curse them in the back. James shifted to block him, drawing his own wand.

Jones had drawn her wand and was waving it like a white flag, “Guys, stop, this is ridiculous.”

“No,” said Frank, “it’s been a long time coming.”

“Everybody stop,” said James. “Harry back up from Frank. We’re all going to back up.”

Harry inched half a step back. Alice said,

“Frank, I know you’re frustrated, I am too, but you can’t take it out on Sirius just because he keeps saying things we don’t want to hear.”

Frank growled but his wand dropped. Harry backed up another step. Sirius was just beginning to think they’d get out of this without bloodshed when the greenhouse door creaked open and someone tip-tapped inside,

“Hem hem. Surely this isn’t Hogwarts Professors duelling? This is most irregular. Hem hem. I’m sure you don’t intend to set such bad example for children.”
Chapter 14

Sirius reacted too slowly. Harry whipped around at the first fake little cough. Sirius’ ears popped under the abrupt, intense build of magic. It was suffocatingly angry and deadly as a charging bull. Moving as quickly as he could, Sirius made a grab for Harry to try and drag him back.

He didn’t catch Harry but he caught his attention and Harry’s head turned sharply towards him. The gathering intensity switched course. Ice fear replaced hot anger. Harry hissed, “Protego.”

The protection spell came down on Sirius with the clang of steel. The tangible magic was so thick it was like wearing an aggressive suit of armour. Judging from James sudden inability to lift his arms, he was having the same issue.

“Uh alley cat,” Sirius whispered, “we need to be able to move.”

Harry studied the new arrival, a toad-like woman in dainty pink, with deep suspicion. But she was occupied by the rest of them busily explaining that they weren’t duelling they were just talking. There was obviously something about being back at Hogwarts that reduced everyone to teenage excuses that had never been believable the first time around.

Taking a deep breath, Harry shook himself out and just as abruptly his wild magic was neatly tucked away and instead of his fierce alley cat there stood a demure house cat. He flicked his wand and the protective spell eased its grip. Sirius immediately placed one careful hand on Harry’s arm and the fake calm dropped away as Harry started to tremble. When Harry took a step closer to him, Sirius gathered him into a tight hug. Harry burrowed into his embrace, tucking his face into the curve of his neck.

James jerked his head towards the door, “Get him out of here, I’ll distract them. And try and find out why our new DADA professor set him off.”

“She’s the new professor?”

“Apparently so. Dolores Umbridge. Ministry stooge and,” James broke off and they both turned to listen to Umbridge do her genteel cough thing and gently correct Frank,

“But Mr Longbottom you are an Auror. As such you have no authority at Hogwarts.”

“Did she seriously –” Sirius began.

“– just say that?” James finished. “I think she did.”

“Merlin and Morganna, this is going to be a massacre. Come with us Jay. They’re plenty distracted.”

“Alright.” And James followed behind as Sirius shepherded Harry out the side door. He would be finding the whole thing darkly hilarious except for the way Harry had reacted. That wasn’t right. Harry had plenty of control over his magic. The mention of Azkaban had him shattering windows, and this Umbridge-woman had reduced him to homicidal fury. He didn’t want to pry into Harry’s history, he didn’t want anything Harry wasn’t willing to give him.

“At least ask him Padfoot.”
“What?”

“I know you don’t want to demand Harry tells you what happened, but at least ask him. He might want to tell you. Tell somebody. And being brutally practical, Snape’s reporting has slowed down, whether that’s him, or the death eaters getting suspicious who knows, but we’re short information. Harry is probably our best source for you-know-who’s recent actions.”

Sirius was so coldly furious, shouting was beyond him, “James.”

“I’m sorry it’s true but it’s still true. And I’m not saying interrogate the poor kid. I won’t say a word to the rest of them, you know that Padfoot. But you can ask him.”

A deep breath and Sirius was able to acknowledge the sense of what James had said, “Fine Prongs, I’ll ask.”

“That’s all I want. And while you’re at it see if you can get him to let up on the last of that protection spell. I still can’t feel the back of my hands.”

Sirius touched the back of his free hand to his face to check, and yes there was a thick solid band of magic, nothing was getting through that.

“Sweet but psychotic, your Harry,” said James, “I can see why you get on.”

“Jay!”

Harry pressed his face in tight to Sirius’ neck and tried not to panic. His overreaction to the mention of Azkaban was reasonable, or at least explainable. He could apologize to Frank Longbottom, not that the man deserved an apology, threatening Sirius like that. But his reaction to Umbridge, there was no explaining that. People thought it was an over-reaction back in that old universe, there was no way he could explain it here.

And Sirius was going to ask about what happened with Riddle. Harry couldn’t tell him.

He couldn’t tell him the truth. Not here in this new universe where Harry Potter had died as a baby, it was too cruel. And the truth, it didn’t really feel like the truth anymore. If he told Sirius about that other universe, it would be a lie worse than anything he made up. He wasn’t that person, never had been. The Wizarding World over there had believed their lies so strongly they’d seen what they wanted. They’d never seen Harry.

“Please don’t make me lie to you,” he whispered.

He pushed that other universe away, it was all so long ago it was crumbled to dust, and refocused on the problem. He had to tell Sirius something.

“Please don’t make me lie to you.”

The truth was, the truth was Harry was brought up by a family that hated magic and fought his way free. That Voldemort had all but destroyed him. And that what was left him loved Sirius Black.

“Please don’t make me lie to you.”

Sirius was going to break things. Luckily James had already fucked off or it would have been him
getting broken. He coaxed Harry into the cover of the trees and sat them down on the grass.

“Harry? Harry love, you don’t need to tell me anything. I promise. You don’t have to lie, you don’t have to do anything.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I,” Harry clenched his fist in Sirius’ shirt.

“It’s okay, I promise.” Sirius stroked his fingers over the tense fist until it relaxed enough that he could take Harry’s hand. “James is an idiot. Ignore him. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“I should tell you.”

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. “If you want to, I’ll listen. But I don’t find talking helps. That stuff, it’s happened but it’s not relevant anymore.”

Harry nodded so quickly he clunked the top of his head against Sirius’ chin. “Exactly. Sorry,” he added, rubbing the back of his fingers against Sirius’ jaw in apology.

“No worries.” He dropped a kiss on Harry’s head.

“I could tell you some stuff though, about you-know-who. If you didn’t ask me how I knew.”

That sounded concerning, Sirius nodded, “If you want.”

“You know he’s Tom Riddle?”

“Yes, but that’s one of the Death Eaters most closely guarded secrets. How on earth do you know?” He caught himself, “Damn, sorry, I said I wouldn’t ask. Ignore me. It was just surprise.”

Harry was still for a long moment.

“I am sorry alley cat. I didn’t mean to ask.”

“It’s alright.” Harry’s hands gripped his very tight and he said very quietly, “He told me we were the same.”

“What?”

“Riddle. He told me we were the same.”

“You are nothing like that monster.”

“Brought up in the muggle world. Hated for being different.”

“You are nothing like that monster.” Sirius fought his temper down because it wasn’t right to shout at Harry. “I promise you, Harry love. You are nothing like him.”

“I could be.”

“What’s that got to do with anything? If you do have the potential, which personally I don’t believe, the fact that you’re not running around killing people for fun makes you even less like
him.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Harry’s voice grew less distant as if he was no longer floating in his memories but back there sitting on the grass with Sirius. “He sounded convincing.”

“Crazy people often can. Doesn’t mean they’re right.” Then Sirius had an awful thought. If you-know-who had been getting all friendly, I’m Tom Riddle, muggles were mean to us, we should be mean to them, if you-know-who had been going the tea and sympathy route, then he must have been trying to recruit Harry.

Harry who’d fled or been thrown out of his muggle family that hated him for being a freak. Sirius knew how desperate that left you. His alley cat hadn’t had any anyone. If the death eaters found him, shown him magic, offered him a home…

“Harry,” panic was fluttering in his throat, “I know I said I didn’t need you to tell me anything, but you have to tell me right now if they got you to do anything you could be arrested for.”

“What?”

“Anything at all Harry, no matter how small.” Sirius sat up so he could see Harry’s face. His love didn’t look anxious or found out, just confused and worried.

“Sirius?”

“You-know-who, when he was being all smarmy. Did he convince you to do anything you could be arrested for before you realized what the death eaters really were? Because we need to get that sorted right now. It’s not your fault if you believed him, he’s convinced a lot of people. We can sort it.” Sirius tried to smile but it wobbled a bit,

“Hell, they’ve given Snape a pass and he exactly knew what he was signing up for. So anything at all Harry, that he persuaded or threatened, or even imperiused you in to doing. Whatever it is, I’ll fix it I promise, I just need to know, right now, so I can get ahead of things.” Because Snape would be on the case, and he would like nothing better than to drag Harry through the dirt to answer for Sirius’ mistakes.

Harry shook his head, “I didn’t believe him, not about the killing muggles for fun and profit thing.”

Sirius breathed a sigh of relief. He would have harangued the Order into some sort of pardon for Harry whatever it took, but this was going to make life easier and safer. Of course Harry was brought up muggle. They were generally better about being cautious with regards to hidden agendas. When the Order explained what was happening to muggles caught up in the mess by ties to their Wizarding kin, they nearly always asked incredulously, and people believed him? before going on to say things about the dangers of cults.

Personally Sirius felt it was a failing of the Hogwarts education system. There should be classes about the dangers of blindly following senile old wizards (or witches, although dark lords tended to be, well lords. Apparently witches had better things to do than running around like a demented KKK. If they wanted power they’d do it the normal way and seduce the wizard in charge – but possibly the witches Sirius knew were particularly sarcastic). A class entitled Do Not Follow Dark Lords might be a bit simplistic, but it would be a start. James was using his Magical Law class to try and hammer home ‘might does not equal right’ and ‘equality before the law’. Sirius was concentrating on personal defence wards in his Arithmancy classes because he was a lot more cynical than James.
And Harry’d had enough cynicism to see through you-know-who’s attempts at recruitment. Thank Merlin.

“Imperius though.”

Sirius’ heart stuttered.

“He made me bow to him.”

Sirius very nearly said, *that’s all*, but managed to shut himself up in time. There was no that’s all when it came to the dark lord.

“The second time, I decided I didn’t really feel like bowing so I didn’t.”

“You resisted you-know-who’s imperius?”

Harry grinned impishly, “I really don’t like being told what to do.”

“Bet that pissed him off.”

“Yep,” smug was a good look on Harry. “Of course then Crucius came out. And when that didn’t work either,” he trailed off with a shrug of his shoulders.

Then things had really gone to hell.

Sirius could think of nothing to say that wouldn’t sound absurd. So he knocked his body into Harry’s and laughed when Harry shoved him back. For a while they were content just giggling and clumsily pushing at each other but then they grinned fiercer and rocked up onto their knees so they could get some leverage into their shoves. In moments they were tumbling across the grass batting and blocking with their forearms, kicking and twisting with their legs. Then they rolled over a bramble patch.

“Ow, ow, stop,” Sirius yelped.

Harry bounced back from him. “Sirius?”

“Ow, it’s okay, just brambles, ow.” Sirius tried to detach the stick of brambles from his hair. It was those nasty fine brambles too, the sort you couldn’t touch without stinging yourself. He couldn’t quite see what he was doing either.

“Stop,” said Harry, “here I’ll do it.” He carefully picked the clinging bramble away. “You have these tiny little cuts.”

“Heal them for me.”

“But?”

Sirius did his best impression of Padfoot’s imploring eyes.

“Fine.” Harry whispered under his breath and ran the tip of his finger along the faint prickling line. Sirius shivered under the hit of healing magic like bright burning kisses along his cheekbone.

Sirius let himself fall back pulling Harry with him to rest heavy between his legs. Harry reacted to the sudden move, tensing to hold Sirius down with his weight as his hands grabbed Sirius’ wrists pinning them to the ground either side of his head.
Sirius wriggled without any intention of getting loose and smiled up at him,

“Well now you’ve got me, what are you going to do with me?” he challenged.

Harry froze for a second uncertain, and his grip relaxed enough that Sirius could have yanked free if he wanted to. He didn’t want to.

“Kisses are considered appropriate,” he prompted.

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he realized he was being teased. The grip on his wrists tightened and Sirius was suddenly being ferociously kissed. Mmm. He relaxed into the heat of it. That was very nice. He wanted more of that. Then Harry pulled back and when Sirius tried to chase after him, implacable hands held him back.

“I got you, I get to do what I want to you,” said Harry, head tilting to one side in question.

Sirius sighed theatrically, “I’m trapped at your mercy,” he agreed.

Harry smirked. His grip tightened for an instant, then his hands were rucking up Sirius’ t-shirt to scrape his nails over the delicate skin of Sirius’ stomach. That was a tactical error because it left Sirius’ hands free to – Sirius’ hands weren’t free.

He glanced wildly to check and his hands were stuck back against the ground with invisible bonds. He looked back at Harry. Harry paused with his hand on the fly of Sirius’ jeans, his head was down but he was watching from under his lashes, waiting for Sirius’ reaction.

Sirius tugged against the hold. No he wasn’t going anywhere. It didn’t quite match what he thought he knew of Harry,

“You do that to all the boys?” he asked, fluttering his lashes.

Harry shook his head, “’S a cooking charm,” he admitted as a blush danced along his cheeks. “For when you need to stir two dishes at the same time.”

Sirius shouted with laughter. “You’ll be the death of me alley cat.” He rolled his weight back onto his shoulders and hooked his legs around Harry’s hips so he could yank Harry down on top of him and hold them both together.

Harry squawked with surprise and just managed to get his hands under him before they bashed heads.

“What are you doing?” he spluttered, “I was going to…”

“No,” said Sirius, ‘we’ve got plenty of time. Just kiss me. That’s all I want.”

It was difficult to tell with Harry so close but he thought his love looked distinctly doubtful.

“Just kiss me,” he promised. Lifting his head he pressed his lips to Harry’s and that was enough. Harry kissed him back, full force like Harry did everything. Sirius groaned with appreciation and rocked their hips together. He didn’t think Harry had experienced the joy of kissing messily until you both came in your jeans. Fortunately Sirius was noble enough to fill the lack.

Then he wasn’t thinking much of anything but Harry, Harry, Harry
Chapter 15

Sirius drowsily blinked at the sky and shifted against the dirt-packed ground. He tapped Harry on his shoulder.

“Up, the ground’s getting harder by the second.”

“Oh sorry.” Harry didn’t sit up, he wriggled one hand loose and pressed it flat against the earth. “Comfy,” he scolded, as if shocked it wasn’t being more considerate. Beneath Sirius the ground softened and plumped until it felt like he was lying on a giant mattress. He squirmed into the cushioning.

“Such a gentleman,” he said to see if he could get Harry to blush again. Harry ducked his head which was as good as an admission. He hummed with satisfaction. “Thank you, that was a nifty bit of transfiguration.”

Harry flopped over onto his back, bouncing slightly against the now spongy ground, and inched his way under Sirius’ arm. “Isn’t it a charm? Though I never quite got the difference between charms and transfiguration.”

Sirius yawned, “Did you want the technical definition or the explanation from my Charmsmith and transfig genius friends?”

“Friends?” said Harry.

“Good choice. Well she said ‘Transfiguration is for gaudy little show-offs who are too lazy to read a book’.”

Harry giggled.

“He said, ‘Charms are for swots who are too boring to actually think for themselves’. And then they argued so loudly they were both thrown out the library and into detention. They got married later, I think that was mostly to make the arguing more convenient.”

Harry eeled up and rubbed his face against Sirius’ cheek like an affectionate cat. Sirius ruffled his hair. They lay there for a while looking up at the sky so pale it was almost white.

Then Harry shifted again, “Ugh. Sticky jeans.”

“Part of the fun.” Sirius smiled to himself as Harry actually wriggled in place to test that out before saying,

“No, definitely ugh. I can’t go back for lunch rush all sticky.” He reached for his wand but Sirius caught his hand,

“No don’t. Scourgify is a rather brisk spell to use near sensitive skin.”

Harry winced, curling in on himself on instinct.

“Exactly. Here try this.” Sirius rolled them over so Harry was on his back and crouched between his legs so he could press his mouth to the fly of Harry’s jeans. He blew lightly letting his magic roll through the material with the warm air.
Harry moaned delightfully.

“Sure you have to go back?” Sirius teased as he pulled away.

“That was not nice.”

“What made you think I was nice? You’re all cleaned up aren’t you?”

“Bastard,” Harry grouched. “Let’s see how you like it.” He flipped them over, and oh okay, that was delightful but not nice at all.

“Are you sure you have to go back,” he pleaded.

“Yes.” Harry folded his arms and pouted.

Sirius sighed, “Come on then, I’ll walk you there.” Harry jumped to his feet and reached out his hand. Sirius let himself be pulled up. And if he kept hold of Harry’s hand as they set off towards Hogsmeade together, well Harry didn’t seem to mind and nobody else needed to know.

After a bit Harry asked,

“So which one was right? Of your friends?”

“Oh they both were. As is usually the case with arguments. Of course charms are boring, that’s the point of them.”

“Huh.”

“With a charm all the magic is set up for you. Ward movement, incantation, and off you go. They’re useful, particularly for people without much magic. They also come in handy when you’re fighting, or emergencies in general, when you don’t have time to think, you just need a result. Useful but boring.”

“I bet your charms mistress friend didn’t say that,” said Harry looking offended on her behalf.

Sirius grinned and shook his head, “She probably wouldn’t say boring but she was never a charms mistress collecting a bunch of spells like a dragon hoarding gold. Charmsmithing is the opposite of that. You create your own charms, which, don’t tell anyone I admitted this, is probably the hardest magic of all. Charmsmithing isn’t – actually yes it is hellishly boring – but it’s also hard work and requires skill and dedication and the ability to do the same thing over and over until it’s perfect.”

“And transfiguration?”

“That’s magic off the cuff. Transfiguration is the just the main use. You can’t create a charm for every possible thing to thing transfiguration, you have to do it fresh every time. It’s the same with anything else. Like you just decided you wanted a more comfortable piece of ground and spelled it that way. If you took the magic that did it, distilled it into to a wand movement and incantation and then refined it down until it was entirely repeatable, you would have a charm.”

“Huh.” Harry thought about that for a moment. “You know what, Charmsmithing does sound boring as hell.”

Sirius laughed, “A man after my own heart. Although Charmsmiths enjoy it, for some reason. Probably because they’re all mad swots. Charms are necessary, you couldn’t have rituals without them, you couldn’t cast magic together without them, but they’re… necessary. Magic isn’t
supposed to be necessary. Sometimes you want to create something beautiful, just because.” He
twirled his free hand through the air thinking about Harry’s bright happy face and let his magic
build, then held the golden sunflower he’d created out to Harry.

Harry stroked one petal gently. “It is beautiful.”

In an effort not to say something stupid about Harry being beautiful, Sirius said, “Did you know
sunflowers seeds spiral in the Fibonacci sequence?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, “That sounds suspiciously like something a swot would say. Were you one
of those annoying secret studiers?”

“Hah. It’s not my fault, I was blackmailed into being an Arithmancy Professor. It comes with the
territory.”

Head tilted to one side, Harry studied him with deep suspicion. Sirius tried not to visibly squirm.

“You like Arithmancy,” he accused him finally. “I bet your transfiguration friend says you’re
boring as hell about it.”

“That’s nothing but slander. Just because he lacks any comprehension of numbers and the way the
perfect equation remaps reality is no –”

Harry grinned at Sirius’ enthusiasm for his subject. Studying had always been do or die for him,
there’d never been a chance to see it as fun. Neville though could get excited about his plants even
when they were freezing cold, up to their eyeballs in mud, watching an empty death eater lair.

He reached up and pretended to try and slap his hand over Sirius’ mouth, “Sw-o-ot,” he
singsonged.

“Heathen,” said Sirius, fighting back until he simply grabbed Harry’s hips and tipped him over his
shoulder.

“Hey,” Harry protested from upside down as Sirius continued to walk towards Hogsmeade.

“I thought you were in a hurry to get back to work,” said Sirius in a voice that was presumably
supposed to sound innocent but was rippling with laughter.

“Oh in that case, carry on.” Harry let himself slump into dead weight making Sirius stumble.

“See this is why you should appreciate Arithmancy, because it lets me do this.” Sirius sketched a
quick series of numbers on Harry’s ankle. In spite of itself, Harry’s body shifted into a more
obliging position. And no Harry did not like that. That was not good. With what control of himself
he did have he flung himself sideways, bracing himself for the crash into the path and hoping it
would shock him free of the spell. But Sirius was already rolling with the motion and before Harry
knew where he was his was standing on his feet, Sirius’ hands around his arms holding him steady.

“Scrunch your toes twice,” Sirius ordered, which caught Harry so by surprise he did it
automatically. “There, better?”

It was better. Harry’s body was back under his control. All of his breath shuddered out of him in
relief.
“Good. I’m sorry Harry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“But I was laughing at your Arithmancy.”

“Uh huh. And I upset you so much you tried to smash your head open on a rock.”

“I over-reacted.” Harry had done that a lot, and it always upset people until he finally learned not to react at all. It was annoying he seemed to have lost that distance.

“Nope. You reacted just fine. I mean, I’d have preferred you saying, Stop let me go, because we could have avoided any chance of rock head smashing, but you were fine. You are absolutely not allowed to let me upset you.”

“Huh.” Sirius was very strange.

“I am sorry.” Sirius seemed to realize he was still holding Harry up and he abruptly let go and stepped back.

“No, don’t go, I’ll do better.” Somehow. It wasn’t like Sirius had done anything bad. Harry could overcome his revulsion at having his body controlled, he could. He’d eventually figured out how to grit his teeth through Hermione’s suffocating hugs after all.

“Oh Harry love, you don’t have to do better. Come here.” Sirius held his arms out and Harry nervously stepped closer. Sirius’ arms closed gently around his waist and he rested his head against Harry’s shoulder. Harry breathed in slowly and soaked in the warmth of Sirius pressed against him. Before the contact could start to make him twitch, Sirius straightened up,

“So I hear somebody needs to be back at work for the lunch rush?”

Harry sighed reluctantly, “Yes, I need to get going.”

“Still want me to come with you?”

“If that’s okay.”

“More than okay. Let’s go.”

“Wait, where’s my sunflower gone?” He’d dropped it in all the kerfuffling.

“Sunflower? Oh that. Don’t worry, I’ll get you some roses.”

“I want my sunflower,” said Harry feeling dangerously sulky and a minute from stamping his foot and throwing a tantrum like Dudley at his worst. Weirdly this made Sirius lean forward and kiss him lightly on one cheek.

“Don’t worry Harry, I’ll find your sunflower for you.”

It only took a minute of scanning the ground before Sirius retrieved the sunflower from a patch of nettles. He dusted it off and then handed it over to Harry with a low sweeping bow.

“Your flower, my love.”

Harry blushed without understanding why. He accepted the flower and tucked the stem behind one ear. Sunflowers being a bit unwieldy he had to stick the flower to his head with magic to get it to stay.
“There,” he said happily.

Laughing, Sirius shook his head, “You look like you’re wearing a lop-sided little beret. I like it.”

Harry took his hand, “Come on, you get to explain to Madam Rosmerta if we’re late.”

“In that case, let’s walk faster.” Sirius didn’t actually speed up though, so Harry felt comfortable asking.

“So Arithmancy is your thing?” because he’d enjoyed Sirius going all earnest about his numbers.

“It’s not ‘my thing’,” huffed Sirius, “I simply have more appreciation for calculations and how equations slot together than some of the plebeians around here.”

“Sure,” Harry nodded as seriously as he could manage.

“And if you don’t stop being so condescending about the whole thing I will drag my books down to the Three Broomsticks and give you a lecture on the interrelatedness of numbers and the semitone octave.”

“That would be great.”

Sirius pulled his head back to look at him quizzically, “Really?”

“Of course.” Listening to Neville talk about his experiments had been one bright spot in a dark time. “Please,” he added because Sirius still wasn’t looking convinced.

“Alright. And I’ll bring my research on Katschei’s Bane, it will be good to talk it through with somebody else. Just remember you brought this on yourself, alley cat.”

Harry bounced twice, “Thank you. I promise to listen but I don’t know how much help I’d be. I never really got Arithmancy.”

“Listening alone would qualify you for sainthood. And – I’m trying not to tread where you don’t want me here – but did you-know-who teach you a lot of magic?”

“Oh.” Harry abruptly remembered he had not in fact gone to Hogwarts but that Riddle had tried to lure him into the death eaters by offering him magic, offering to show him what it could do. Of course Riddle would have concentrated on the offensive magics, that was why Harry could cast a mean blasting curse but knew only the most basic cleaning charms.

“A bit,” he admitted anxiously.

“It’s okay, it’s just, you obviously know about the unforgivables and I reckon he probably didn’t bother to explain why you shouldn’t cast them.”

“Because they’re ‘unforgivable’, and if people see you using them they’ll hate you for it.”

“That’s not wrong. But it’s not the real reason.”

“Oh, is there a real reason? I never really understood what was so unforgivable about them. They’re evil spells, obviously. But Amorentia and memory charms seem just as unforgivable to me. And it’s not like it’s difficult to kill someone with a nice light charm like Leviosa if you cancelled it at the right time.”

Sighing, Sirius ran his hand through his hair, “And I’m right damnit. Of course you-know-who
wouldn’t bother to explain the distinction. He probably doesn’t even believe in it.”

“So there is a real reason?”

“Yes. It’s basic magic theory but he no doubt skipped that too. Magic takes power. Wizards and witches, unlike muggles, generate their own magic power they can use to cast spells. Use up all your magic and you have to wait for it to regenerate. With me so far?”

Harry nodded.

“So, obviously the first thing any respectable wizard wants is more power. This is why charms are useful, they let people cast magic without using too much power. And if you really understand a charm you can do more with it than a wizard just throwing magic at the problem. Which is why Rosie won’t let me try and fix up her kitchen instead of the regular charms repair man.”

“I dusted down all the charms and runes, but I didn’t poke too hard.”

“Sensible man. Though I maintain she got way too annoyed over one tiny little flood.”

Harry grinned, “I’m not sure how you can have a tiny little flood.”

“It was only an inch or two of water, just because it sprayed everywhere was no reason to shriek so loudly.”

“Poor, poor Sirius.”

“Exactly,” said Sirius with a defiant nod, completely ignoring Harry’s mocking tone. “So on with the lecture. To increase your magical power you can: cast the spell with other people, use a ritual to build your power, on your own or with others, blood sacrifice – be sure to use your own blood not someone else’s.”

“I wouldn’t,” Harry protested.

“I’m not talking from a moral standpoint. Being used as a sacrifice, gives the sacrifice power. It also tends to annoy them. My father, for example, was found torn to shreds in a locked, empty room.”

The flippant way Sirius said the words made Harry press close in an attempt at comfort. Sirius resisted, then slumped into him. After a moment he continued,

“Muggles used to use blood sacrifices but as I said, there are issues. So nowadays they mostly stick to science. Muggles can also use the last and most dangerous sort, soul magic. Nothing good can ever come of using soul magic. Souls aren’t supposed to be used that way and it perverts everything it touches. You’ve heard the stories of muggles selling their souls. Do they ever end well?”

Harry shook his head. “But what if you were using it for good. Like to save someone.”

“That doesn’t make any difference. Look at this way, if I break my wrist punching a wall, you will call me a moron.”

“And tease you loudly,” said Harry, because he wanted to discourage actions of that sort.

Sirius shot him a grin before continuing, “And if I break my wrist punching a little girl in the face —”
"I will stun you and destroy the behavioural curses on you," said Harry quickly, because he wasn’t having Sirius say anything so ridiculous about himself.

"Right. And if I break my wrist punching Snape in the face to defend your honour, you will swoon with emotion and weep tears over your gallant defender."

"Hi, I’m Harry," said Harry, “I don’t think we’ve met.”

Sirius laughed and poked him in the ribs in retaliation. “Well that told me. Anyway my point is it doesn’t matter how high-minded the reason for breaking my wrist is, my wrist is still broken. It’s like that with soul magic. There’s almost unlimited power but anything you do is tainted.”

An idea was beginning to take shape in Harry’s head and he flinched back from the implications,

“So if you, say, cast a spell to save someone’s life using soul magic –”

“You’d save their life but that would be all, they might be arrested, or imprisoned, but something would go wrong. There’s an entire branch of lachrymose ballads based on exactly that. The Lay of Hilfrieda was Trixie’s favourite. In it Hilfrieda uses soul magic to protect her betrothed in an upcoming battle. He survives the battle but is captured and sold into slavery, there’s about a hundred verses on his suffering before he finally fights his way back to her to discover Hilfrieda has married someone else.”

Harry glowered, “That is not a good story.”

“In some accounts there are another couple of verses where Hilfrieda’s husband eventually dies and they finally get married.”

“That doesn’t make it better.”

“I’ve been told that before. Trixie thought it was romantic. Though she also thought Hilfrieda should have simply killed the inconvenient husband. Anyway like I said there’s a lot of stories of soul magic going wrong, usually cast by witches because back in the old days they used to think they shouldn’t tell witches about such distasteful matters, which just meant as soon as they realized they could use soul magic to boost their strength, they immediately did so because nobody warned them.”

“Right,” said Harry weakly, thinking about a muggle-born witch in another universe who had a baby she was desperate to protect.

“Now charms use varying amounts of power, it costs more power to affect an animal than an object, more to affect a muggle, and even more to affect a wizard because they’re magic power is working against you. We’re assuming offensive magic here.”

“Uh huh,” Harry agreed, scrambling to keep up as Sirius was going on with the lecture as if he hadn’t said anything momentous at all.

“So that’s why you have charms, jinxes, hexes, and curses. They each cost you increasing amounts of power.”

“Oh, I always wondered why some jinxes seemed meaner than hexes.”

“It’s nothing to do with morals. It’s all about power. Your average wizard or witch barely uses magic in their personal life because they use up all their magic at work. Weaker wizards can’t even cast the more powerful hexes and curses. Your ambitious wizard or witch looks around for ways to
boost their power and if they’re unlucky they stumble on soul magic. They use soul magic to boost their standard spells, maybe even cast a curse they wouldn’t have the power too normally. And eventually it will all come crashing down on them.”

“Right, still not seeing how the unforgivables come in.”

“Well standard spells you only use soul magic if you’re stupid enough to try, the three unforgivables though, they’re set up to be powered directly by soul magic. That’s what makes them unforgivable, they always use soul magic. It doesn’t matter if you use imperius to get a suicidal wizard to back away from the edge of a cliff, you’ve still tainted your soul and his.”

“oh.”

“Don’t misunderstand, people still use them of course. And once or twice isn’t going to damn you. They just wear away at your soul, and one day it will wear thin, and one day it will snap.” Sirius scuffed his feet against the path. “Honestly, I can’t claim any credit for rejecting dark magic when my entire family is one giant object lesson.”

Harry wrapped both arms around Sirius’ waist and hugged him as hard as he could, trying to squeeze the sadness out.

“It’s fine.”

“No it isn’t.”

Sirius sighed, “And then you have idiots like Moody ‘taking the fight to the enemy’ and ‘using their own weapons against them’ like there’s no way that’s going to go wrong.”

“Do they not teach people this at Hogwarts?”

“Oh Moody knows. But he thinks he knows better because people always do. Back in Phineas Nigellus’ day this was all covered as part of the curriculum because he was a rancid old bastard but he believed in education. Later they decided it was a ‘sensitive’ subject that should be taught by the parents, which was no help to the muggle-borns, poor sods. James kicked up a total ruckus about that when Dumbledore strong-armed us into working at Hogwarts and eventually got Wizarding Culture added as a subject. It doesn’t help with the people thinking they know better thing, but at least they know.

“And it always goes bad?”

“Always. Ironically the nobler your purpose is the more likely it is to snarl up. You imperius a friend to look like an idiot in front of a girl he likes, well there’s enough malice swirling around that the reaction is contained. You smash a bottle over someone’s head, you expect broken glass all over the place. You imperius a friend to help him ask out a girl he likes because he’s too shy on his own and it’s like trying to hold an exploding glass, you’ll cut yourself and everyone around you.”

“You didn’t –” Harry asked, nervous Sirius was drawing his examples from life.

“No, because I had more sense. But when we were seventh years Mulciber tried the first, said friend left him tied upside and naked to the Quidditch posts. We were out of school when McLaggan tried to be helpful and poor Healey found himself asking his crush out just after she was told her father had been murdered by death eaters. It did not end well for any of them.”

“But that was coincidence.”
“Yes, a coincidence caused by the backlash of soul magic. You know they say Merlin used his soul magic to power the creation of the greatest magical court the world will ever see. And that’s why Camelot failed in a morass of treachery.”

“But, wasn’t it a glorious thing, and still a beacon of hope, and, and… stuff?” Harry needed Hermione here, she’d probably have lots of arguments in favour of Camelot.

“Think how great it could have been without the backlash of soul magic. Maybe not quite as glorious, but something that stuck around. Instead it’s been a political bludger, and its failure plunged us into the Dark Ages. The Romans had indoor plumbing, Harry, and we lost it for one and a half thousand years. Indoor plumbing. And central heating!”

“Okay, that is pretty terrible,” Harry agreed, trying not to laugh at the tragic face Sirius was pulling.

“Just imagine Hogwarts with central heating. No waking up in the middle of the night because your heating charm failed. No frost inside the windows. No having to wear three sweaters. No spelling away the mould every month. No –”

“Alright, alright, I get it,” Harry waved his arms to try and halt what promised to be a truly epic rant. “Why is this such a thing?”

“You’re a muggle. You’ve always had central heating. You don’t understand what a revelation it is not to have to charm the ice off the water before you can wash your face.”

“You poor deprived wizards.”

“Well most of them deserve it. Acting like muggles can’t do anything. James is always banging on about nuclear weapons, but I tell you central heating would have the average wizard won over in days.”

“Don’t muggle-borns tell anybody about central heating?”

“They try, but nobody really listens. It’s not until you experience central heating that you understand. So, soul magic is bad because you end up with no central heating and no indoor plumbing.” Sirius wagged one finger sternly, Harry looked dutifully cowed,

“I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Good. And seriously,” Sirius scrunched his eyebrows at the pun which did not help the seriousness, “Avoid all three unforgivables. No Imperius. No Cruciatus obviously, the soul taint is why it’s so damaging. And no Killing Curse either. If you want to kill someone, use a well-timed Leviosa. Or better, a tripping jinx on the stairs, it’s a lot better for plausible deniability.”

“Tripping jinx on stairs,” Harry repeated, that made sense but, “how would you make sure you tripped the right person?”

“Aha, that is where Arithmancy comes in.”

“Go on then,” Harry encouraged.

And Sirius was off describing how Arithmancy wasn’t boring like charms but how each time you set up a spell you had to remap the topological net and re-solve the adjusted equation (which sounded like a lot of extra work to Harry, but apparently that was missing the point, that was what made it interesting) and then reintegrate the function in order to take the intrinsic variables into
Harry would have a headache but he’d mostly stopped listening and was just watching Sirius all enthused and happy.

They stopped at the edge of Hogsmeade.

“I should let you go,” said Sirius. Harry was going to object to being abandoned but then he saw the way Sirius was eyeing the people in the street, and how those people were stopping to stare.

“Thank you for walking me.” Then he kissed Sirius quickly, right in front of those disapproving stares because Sirius was with him and that was something Harry would boast about anyway he could.

“I’ll be by the Three Broomsticks later.”

“Good, I’ll save you some supper.”

Sirius turned towards Hogwarts, then paused, and turned back.

“Harry, quick, tell me not to be an idiot.”

“No, be an idiot,” said Harry, entranced by the wild light in his eyes. “Be a total idiot.”

“Alright, but I’m blaming this on you.”

Then Sirius swooped on him and before Harry knew where he was he was being violently dipped and had to bring up one leg for balance. Sirius paused there, Harry bent backwards in his arms. Harry gave up on struggling for balance and relaxed, trusting Sirius to hold him there.

“You have to be the craziest person I’ve ever met,” said Sirius softly. He bent his head and gave Harry a small chaste kiss. Then he levered them both upright, Harry could feel the soft swirl of his magic helping keep them both steady. Sirius stayed pressed in close, tucking his head in against Harry’s chest.

Harry looked down to avoid glaring too obviously at the gathering crowd “This is not helping you keep a low profile,” he whispered.

“At this moment I’m past caring,” Sirius confessed. “It’s not like they can hate me more.”

“If you’re trying to convince me not to use the unforgivables, that’s not the way to do it.”

“No,” Sirius pulled away. “Never on my account. I can’t tell you never at all, but never on my account. Promise me.”

“Alright.”

Sirius would probably have noticed that wasn’t exactly a promise, but then Rosmerta called,

“Harry! If you’ve finished scandalizing the village, lunch isn’t going to serve itself.”

“Coming,” Harry yelled back. He kissed Sirius again, “I’ll see you tonight, yes?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Harry!” Rosmerta called again.
“Got to go.” And Harry fled into the Three Broomsticks before he had to watch Sirius leave.
just as a note, Harry's original universe followed the books pretty much up to the end of the fifth book before diverging with the sixth. At some point in a hurried ministry meeting some poor intern who'd only just left Hogwarts said he wished he could go back and some bright spark pointed out that Hogwarts was in fact a fortified castle and as such the perfect place to settle the Ministry in safety from the Death Eaters. Once this idea took hold a lot of people joined them and the Ministry never fell. Harry and the Order/Aurors had a nastier fight on their hands but they were the ones who took the brunt of it. Actually more civilians survived and were less traumatised by the whole thing (no muggle-borns were sent to Azkaban for example).

Also these people will not shut up. Sorry there's no Sirius/Harry in this bit. Lots of Neville though.

Lunch was busy again. It didn’t have quite the same hostile feel as before, or possibly Harry was too distracted to notice. He was collecting nods and good mornings though, along with the curious stares so that was an improvement. He smiled and nodded back as appropriate but his attention was on turning over what Sirius had said, that little glimpse of his parents, and the idea that his mother had drawn on magic she shouldn’t have to save him.

Finally he decided it didn’t matter, not truly. He’d always know his mother had done her best for him, fought for him. If she used some magic nobody even told her was dangerous and it had consequences she hadn’t intended or wanted, so be it. It didn’t matter here.

That whole other universe was becoming less and less important. What mattered was now. So Harry smiled extra sweetly at the crotchety witch in front of him,

“Oh, I’m sorry you’ve never had anybody willing to kiss you in front of the neighbours. That must be very disappointing.”

Her eyes flashed.

Harry smiled sweeter, “Here, have a sugar pastry, on the house.”

The witch behind her chortled, “Serves you right Edith. Now say thank you, or he’ll think you need even more sweetening up.”

The crotchety witch said nothing very loudly. Bristling with indignation, she took her tea – and the free pastry, and stomped off.

“Well done love,” said the next witch. “Don’t let Edith get to you. That Sirius Black was always wild but I never believed half of what they said about him. Two bacon rolls and two teas, there’s a dear.”

Harry’s smile was a bit fixed as he served her. He honestly found those sort more annoying. At
least Edith had confidence in her nasty convictions. But the cheerful witch was the sort he needed on their side so he didn’t yell anything about why couldn’t she have supported Sirius when he needed it and kept smiling as he checked with her about milk and sugar.

Eventually the rush died down enough that Harry could clear up the left over crockery and set the napkins to marching into the laundry bin. The last one signed off with a jaunty salute and pulled the bin lid over itself back into place.

The till was full so Harry unloaded three handfuls of sickles and knuts into his apron and took them through to Rosmerta’s tiny back office and tipped them carefully out onto the counting board. The enchantment on the board immediately had the coins stacking themselves into neat piles and shuffling onto the counting squares.

Harry eyed the several galleons of change, “Do you think there’s enough here to get somebody in to see to the sink.

“Sorry child,” Rosmerta leaned into the office, flicked her wand at the money and then at the locked chest in the corner. The lid of the chest rose up, the money pelted inside, and the chest slammed shut. “I need to save as much money as possible. If the death eaters burn this place down, I’ll need the coins.”

Harry scowled. That made sense. Why would you put money into a place that might go up in smoke at any moment taking all the money you’d spent with it – but they needed those repairs.

“Stupid death eaters.”

Rosmerta laughed at him, “Yes, that’s exactly what annoys me most about the death eaters, the fear of being snatched for a dark revel is a mere trifle compared to not being able to repair the cooker.”

She shouldn’t have to worry about either of those things. “Stupid, stupid death eaters.”

“You said it. Look, if we keep doing well I might risk getting the cooker reset. It’s getting harder and harder to start up in the mornings.” She paused and straightened a pile of bills on the desk. “Though you don’t seem to have any problems. Maybe I could leave the cooker to you, and get sink repaired instead.”

Harry shook his head rapidly, no, no, Madam Rosmerta couldn’t rely on him to keep the cooker going. He wasn’t reliable. Everyone knew that. Thankfully someone called for service and Harry hurried away to sell them three butter beers and a pumpkin juice. Then he grabbed a bucket and brush to scrub down the tables. There must be something he could do. It was ridiculous that Rosmerta had the money she just couldn’t spend it because the Wizarding World had never heard of insurance. Though they’d probably exclude things like death eater damage from the policy so you’d be no better off even if you did have insurance (Uncle Vernon had opinions on insurance that he had shared loudly for Harry to hear even in his cupboard).

Finally Rosmerta took the brush from his hand,

“Alright enough Harry, leave something for you to do next week. Go get some fresh air.”

“I can – okay fresh air is it.” Harry washed his hands and took off his apron. He headed out the back and skirted away from the village. Habit had his feet automatically taking the path to Hogwarts. He stopped when he noticed, he didn’t want to cause another scene at Sirius’ work. But on the other hand, Neville. He wanted to help Neville.
Dithering, he shifted foot to foot, then remembered the toad woman had infiltrated Hogwarts. Neville needed to be warned.

Decision made, he stalked the rest of the way to the castle. It was just as big and oppressive as it had been before. Harry hopefully skirted the greenhouses, but no Neville. He wandered around to Gryffindor’s Tower, and there was one window open. Given school wasn’t starting until tomorrow, that was probably Neville.

He should have brought a broomstick. It was tempting to borrow one from the broom shed but Frank Longbottom had been very grumpy about his presence, he’d probably throw a complete fit if he caught Harry borrowing a broom.

So climbing it was.

After one false start Harry kicked off his trainers because toes were grippier than shoes, then it was only a matter of a weightless charm and scrabbling from window sill to window sill until he reached the open window.

Looking inside he found it was Neville’s room. It was surprisingly small, Neville must have his own room. There was a four-poster bed, neatly made because Neville always made his bed, a large chest of drawers, and a desk were Neville was sitting with his head in his hands.

Harry knocked politely at the window.

Neville flinched and his head dropped so he could cover it with his hands. He didn’t look around.

“Uh, hello,” said Harry.

Neville slowly turned his head towards him, like he was expecting a trick.

“Oh, Mr Harry.”

“Sorry to burst in on you like this.”

“No, come in. Were you looking for Professor Black? He’s getting a talking-to from Professor Potter.”

Harry stumbled as he clambered over the edge of the window. He had made things difficult for Sirius, even if Sirius had denied it. With an effort he pushed his concern away, later, tonight, he’d figure out how to fix it, for now he needed to concentrate on Neville. Determined smile on his face he said,

“Actually I came to see you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, because Professor Black says you’re his favourite student, and he’s my favourite person, so I thought we introduce ourselves.”

“Professor Black said that?” Neville’s whole face lit up. It was physically painful to watch. It wasn’t difficult any more to tell this Neville apart from the one Harry had known. This was like his Neville’s younger brother. Well Harry might have failed his Neville, but he could look after his little brother for him.

“Yes he did. And you looked sad just now. Is there anything I can do?”
Neville shook his head. “No, it’s alright. There isn’t anything anyone can do. And if you did my dad would just get mad. Did he get mad at you? it sounded like he did. If he did, I’m sorry.”

“He did get a bit mad, but it’s not your fault. And if you need something, we don’t have to tell your dad.”

“It’s alright. I’m alright.” Neville huddled in on himself. Harry’s fingers twitched. Tentatively he walked over to Neville and rested one hand on his shoulder. Neville gasped, whirled around and flung himself at Harry in a desperate tackle hug.

Harry had to bite down on the instinct to smack the intruding body away from him. He shuffled backwards until he hit the edge of the bed and managed to field Neville so he was at least sitting beside him and no longer on top of him. Neville was crying great shocky gasps. Harry patted his back.

“It’s going to be okay,” he promised. He wasn’t quite sure how to make it so yet, but he was sure Sirius would have some ideas.

“No it isn’t,” Neville sniffled, “I’m useless at everything. And Professor Black is so nice.”

“Yes he is. Why is that a problem?”

“Because he never gets mad. He should get mad with me.”

Harry wasn’t sure how anyone managed to get mad at Neville. He was certain Sirius could never.

“No he shouldn’t,” he said firmly. “You work hard and try your best. Nobody should get mad at you.”

“Then why do they,” Neville wailed.

“I don’t know,” said Harry. He didn’t think it was polite to straight up call them idiots in front of Neville. “I’m not mad at you, and Professor Black isn’t mad at you.”

That convinced Neville to take a great gulping breath and swipe at his eyes.

“That’s better.” Inspiration struck then and Harry fidgeted for the back pocket of his jeans. He’d sunk a lot of magic into messing with its dimensions so he could wedge a couple of bars of chocolate inside and be sure he always had food. He pulled out the first bar, the packet was bent and a bit bedraggled – the magic was a tad wonky so although the pocket allowed him to tuck the bars away in one piece and hide them as if they’d vanished, somehow they still ended up crumpled.

“Here,” he said to Neville, “have a piece of chocolate, it will do you good.” He broke off a strip of dairy milk that had, now he thought about it, travelled with him from the other universe. Rosmerta kept feeding him so he hadn’t needed to break into his emergency stash.

Neville snapped off one square and tucked into his cheek to suck at it. Harry folded over the edge of the packet and tucked it back into his pocket.

“Is your pocket magic? I thought jeans were muggle.”

“Jeans are muggle. But I’m magical so I enchanted the pocket. It’s not perfect but it works okay.”

“Professor Black always wears jeans. Professor Potter does too under his robes. My mum tuts about it.”
Harry reminded himself he couldn’t insult Neville’s parents in front of him because that wouldn’t be fair. Also saying Sirius looked hot in jeans would probably be inappropriate. His Neville would definitely tut at him for corrupting his little brother. Fortunately Neville didn’t seem to need him to say anything as he continued,

“Professor Potter said I shouldn’t worry about it. That my mum and dad only tut because they’re mad Professor Black saved me when they didn’t. But that doesn’t seem fair. Surely they that would make them be nice to Professor Black?”

Harry again reminded himself that he couldn’t insult Neville’s parents in front of him. “Sirius saved you? What happened?”

“Oh, didn’t you know? It was in all the papers. Though I s’pose they didn’t really mention Professor Black saving me.”

“Uh huh.” Of course they wouldn’t.

Neville hunched his shoulders and ate the rest of the chocolate in four quick bites.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want,” Harry said, because he hated being made to talk and it wasn’t right to do that to Neville.

Neville relaxed again. “No, it’s alright. You don’t – They, it’s like they have greedy eyes that want to pull all my insides out.”

Harry winced sympathetically and patted Neville’s shoulder. He knew what that was like, they always smiled too, like that could hide their insatiable bird eyes and sharp-pointed clutching fingers that wanted to pluck out all your secrets and leave you a bleeding shell.

“They only want to know about you-know-who, you want to know about Professor Black.”

Harry nodded.

“Professor Black was always nice to me. He used to take me for ice cream when the Order had their meetings. Then Dad found out and he got really, really mad. Professor Potter took me away. I think Dad hit Professor Black. I asked Professor Black later and he didn’t say no, he just said not to worry about it, it was only grown-ups being stupid. And I asked Professor Potter but he asked me what Professor Black said and then he said, well there you go then. Professor Potter is very frustrating sometimes.”

Harry was having a dizzy moment where everything had gone very distant. He was going to kill Frank Longbottom, they were going to find pieces of him from here to France.

Neville tugged on his arm, “Mr Harry?”

“Yes Neville.” No he couldn’t slaughter Neville’s father. He was going to turn him into a llama instead, so he could spit and snarl and be as unpleasant as wanted, and nobody else would have to put up with him.

“Are you okay? You looked really funny for a moment.”

“I’m fine. Go on, tell me what happened next.”

“Professor Black said he couldn’t take me out for ice cream anymore because my dad was worried about security, even though Professor Black was always really careful. And he always said he was
taking me out for ice cream. But nobody listens properly to Professor Black.”

“Uh huh.”

“So Professor Black would go and get me ice cream and then we’d sit under the trees in the garden and he’d talk to me.” Neville brightened suddenly, “He told me a real big important secret that I mustn’t tell anybody but he trusted me.”

“That’s great,” said Harry fighting the urge to say, tell me, tell me. He wanted to know all Sirius’ secrets but he wanted Sirius to be the one to tell him.

Neville hunched forward and whispered loudly, “Did he tell you? About Padfoot?”

“About – oh, yes, Padfoot, I know he can turn into Padfoot.”

“Sssh,” Neville scolded. “You have to keep it a secret.”

“I will. Professor Black would be pleased you’re keeping it for him.”

Neville beamed proudly. “Professor Black knew he could rely on me.”

“Yes he did.”

“And he’d be Padfoot sometimes. He’d run after balls and fight over sticks. He’d,” Neville stopped but his hands made a stroking gesture like he was petting a dog’s head. “It was almost as good as having a dog of my own.”

“Do you want a dog?”

“Yes but dogs don’t make good familiars, so I had to have a toad to help with my spell focusing. Trevor’s very nice, but he isn’t very –” Neville wrapped his arm around himself.

Harry curled his arm around Neville’s shoulders, “Yeah, but you got to run about with Padfoot sometimes.”

“Ssh,” Neville glanced about suspiciously like someone might step out of the walls and overhear, which wasn’t technically impossible given this was Hogwarts. “It’s a secret.”

“It is. And I know Professor Black would be glad you’re so careful about keeping it.”

Neville came out of his huddle as he snuggled into Harry’s space. “He told me stories. About knights and ladies and magic. And about Hogwarts sometimes. I wasn’t scared of going to Hogwarts, I wasn’t –”

“Of course you weren’t.”

“– but everyone worried about security all the time. And Professor Black said how big Hogwarts was, and even if the paintings were friendly, they’re paintings, they can’t do anything. So I was, I was,”

“Naturally concerned,” suggested Harry.

“Yes,” Neville nodded happily, “I was natur’ly concerned. So Professor Black told me if I wanted him to he could ward me so he’d always know where I was and be able to find me if something happened. And I said yes. I don’t care that my dad says Black’s a coward and as good as a death eater, Professor Black is always nice to me.”
“Of course he is.”

“And when Professor Quirrell stole me, Professor Black was able to find me.”

“Quirrell stole you?” That was different. Harry had been negligently assuming things had been much the same as that other universe just with a different Chosen One, clearly he needed to do some research.

“Yes, he was the DADA professor in my first year but he was being eaten by you-know-who. I didn’t like him, he was all creepy, but my dad said I needed to adjust to working harder. Then when it was Halloween, Professor Quirrell gave me detention. He told me to come out to Forbidden Forest and then there was a portkey. It was a graveyard. There was a r-ritual.” Neville was starting to shake.

“I’ve heard of it, Bone of the father, Flesh of the servant, Blood of the enemy.”

Neville nodded blindly, burying his head into Harry’s side.

“That must have been very scary.”

Neville’s head nodded.

“But you’re okay now.”

His head came up. “Professor Black saved me. He realized I wasn’t at the feast, and he figured out I was at the graveyard and he came right away, while Professor Potter went to get my mum and dad and the Order.”

Neville’s speech began to speed up and run together, “You-know-who he’d been this freaky baby in Quirrell’s head like he’d been budded in there but then the cauldron caught fire and he was turning into this alien thing and I was really, really… but then there was this big crash of magic and Professor Black was there.”

Neville looked at Harry then, eyes wide with awe,

“He landed right in front of me, and he said good fucking god then he yelled a spell and blasted the alien thing right over into the gravestones. He was coming to help me and he asked me if I was okay, but the other death eaters appeared out the dark and I screamed. Professor Black shielded us and then he was duelling the death eaters. They were all yelling and there was magic bursting everywhere. The two death eaters were getting slower, and one couldn’t stand up anymore and I thought it would be okay. But then the you-know-who thing got back up. He was wearing a great black robe of shadows and he was all loppy-sided and limping from where he hit the gravestones.”

“Good,” said Harry vindictively.

“Yeah,” agreed Neville. “And you-know-who, he spoke all slithery like nails on a blackboard. He said, ah the defiant little Black I’ve had you licking my boots before, and I’ll have you crawling at my feet again and Professor Black said try it now I’ve a wand in my hand.”

When Neville repeated the words used they sounded slightly robotic as his soft voice mimicked the rougher intonations of men fighting for their lives. It had an eerie effect coupled with his flat matter of fact description of the battle and his occasional commentary, which was the only time he sounded like himself.

“And he cursed you-know-who and then they were duelling, and Professor Black kept dodging but
he had to keep coming back to protect me because I couldn’t get down although I tried and tried.

“You-know-who was saying horrid things to Professor Black, he said you broke and begged for death, let’s see what I can make you beg for this time, and Professor Black said, you’re all talk and no action, just like my first boyfriend, and you-know-who screeched like a howler and yelled, clever words, I’ll see you choke on them, and Professor Black said, pillow talk’s about the same standard too.

“The short death eater laughed then, so you-know-who cursed him next, and Professor Black said, mind you, you’re limper than Richey ever was and he was a muggle. You-know-who got really, really super-crazy mad and shot curses off in all directions, I guess he didn’t like being told he was limping.”

“Yes, let’s go with that,” said Harry.

“Because you-know-who was distracted, Professor Black had time to put up a shield spell and break me loose and I fell to the floor but when I looked up Professor Black’s shielding spell was disintegrating and this bright orange curse got through and everything smelt of burning.

“Professor Black told me to run and hide, then he swapped his wand into his other hand and cast a dark purple spell that made you-know-who shriek again. I hid behind a gravestone and I couldn’t look anymore but I could still see the flash of the spells. And then everything went quiet. So I peeked around the edge of the stone. It was cold and the moss got under my fingernails. Professor Black was standing on his own and he was sort of swaying. The two death eaters were standing behind you-know-who and they were all watching Professor Black, waiting.

“You-know-who, his mouth doesn’t really smile, but it looked like he would have been smiling if he could, and he said, So any last words, muggle-lover. And Professor Black said, With all due respect, did you actually think it through before you got rid of the nose? And then he vanished.

“The short death eater laughed again though he tried to pretend he didn’t. You-know-who screeched like he was on fire. And Professor Black reappeared behind them and hit them all with curses before they realized what has happening. But he wasn’t fast enough to get to cover and you-know-who hit him with three spells and pinned him up against a gravestone. Not laughing now, muggle-lover.

“I don’t know, that lack of nose is always gonna be hil – and then Professor Black started screaming.”

Neville stopped then and Harry was tempted to shake the rest of the story of him even though he knew Sirius was perfectly fine now.

“I was so scared I couldn’t move.”

“That’s okay.”

“I couldn’t help Professor Black when he was screaming, but he would have helped me.”

“Well he’s your teacher and you’re his favourite student. That’s what teachers are there for, to help their students.”

“Professor Black is my favourite teacher,” and there was the gravel in Neville’s voice that Harry had been missing.

“Of course he is,” he agreed cheerfully. “That why me and Sirius, Professor Black, are going to
make sure you-know-who never hurts you again.”

“But, Professor Black doesn’t think I’m a coward, does he? Because I couldn’t help him. I wanted to help him.”

“No. You’re a student. Your job is to do what your teachers tell,” Harry trailed off then because he didn’t actually approve of that sentiment. So he changed it to, “Your job was to do what Professor Black told you because you knew he had your best interests at heart. He needed you to stay down and stay hidden. You did exactly right.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Didn’t Professor Black tell you that?”

“Yes but he’s so nice.”

“He would never be nice when it came to your safety. I bet he’s really strict about that.”

“One time when we went for ice cream, I forgot my emergency portkey and we came straight home, we didn’t even stop for ice cream.”

“There you go.”

Neville sighed and he sat up a little straighter, like something heavy had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Professor Black was still screaming when the Order all popped in. Even Dumbledore was there. They all threw spells at you-know-who but he lifted his robe in front of like a curtain and vanished behind it. The two death eaters ran away too.

“And then everyone was fussing over me, they wouldn’t listen when I told them I was okay and they needed to help Professor Black. But Professor Potter ran right past us all and slid to his knees by Professor Black, no, no, no, if you die on me, you son of a bitch, I’ll have you resurrected and turned over to Snape for potions ingredients.

“And Professor Black said, Love you too, Jay. Then Professor Potter apparated them both away.”

Harry breathed a sigh of relief that Sirius was finally safe, even if it was all over a long time ago.

“My mum went kind of crazy and she shouted everyone away and then she cried a lot. I don’t really remember how we got back to Hogwarts but suddenly I was in the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey was fussing over me and Mum. We were behind a screen but we could still hear everyone yelling. Madam Pomfrey said she’d make them go away but I begged and begged to know if Professor Black was alright. Mum said, she didn’t mean me to hear but I did, she said perhaps it would be best for him if Black died defending one prophecy child after he failed the other.”

Harry’s jaw was rigid with held back words.

“Then finally, finally Professor Potter came back. He ignored all the others shouting and came right over to me and crouched down by my bed and promised me that Professor Black was going to be fine. The shouting got even worse but Professor Potter is really good at ignoring shouting. He stood up and straightened his robe, then he waited until they were all finally quiet.

“He said that Sirius was injured but he would recover. That he needed his family magic so he was staying at his family mansion until he improved. And before they started shouting again, perhaps
they should leave me in peace to recuperate. Then they all left so I don’t know what happened next. Professor Potter is very frustrating.”

“Yes, I can see that he is,” Harry agreed automatically.

It was only with a great effort that he restrained himself from immediately fleeing to find Sirius and make sure he was safe. His mind was clogged with imagining Sirius screaming and it was hard to think coherently around the awful echoes in his head.

“Are you alright?” asked Neville.

“Um maybe.”

“Oh that’s bad, nobody ever says maybe.”

Harry managed a smile. “It’s okay. I’m just worried about Professor Black. I know he’s safe here at Hogwarts but I still worry.”

Neville’s brows lowered, “You wanted to help me because of Professor Black?” he asked slowly.

“I want to help you cause you’re a good person who deserves help.”

“And because I’m Professor Black’s favourite student.”

“Somewhat because of that yes,” Harry couldn’t see any point denying it. “But also because you’re a good person who deserves help.”

“I think you’re a good person who deserves help too. I think Professor Black would want me to help you.” Neville nodded to himself and Harry could see his older self peeking through again. “Are you any good at sneaking around? I can show you the secret passage to Professor Black’s classroom.” He peered up at Harry, cautiously waiting on his reaction.

Harry grinned back at him, “I am truly excellent at sneaking around.”
Sirius had the joy of watching James’ eyes pop practically out of his head,

“You-know-who tried to recruit him?”

“Apparently. It makes sense when you think about it. Yes, the death eaters enjoy killing all the muggle-borns they can get their hands on, but Harry is powerful – that’s not just me is it?”

“No, you are predictably appallingly swoony over your boyfriend but you’re not over-estimating his magic. I think we’re under-estimating to be honest.”

“Eh, maybe. All I want is for him to have enough power to look after himself.”

“Well he definitely has that.”

“And the death eaters would like that. You-know-who could use that.”

“And if he was out on his own... Yes I can see why they tried their luck. In fact, I’m not sure why they didn’t succeed.”

“Harry doesn’t like people telling him what to do. And he was brought up muggle. He doesn’t trust overly kind people making fancy promises.”

“Good for him. Did he know anything about you-know-who’s plans?”

“Um, I meant to ask him but we got a bit distracted.”

“Oh good god, I do not need to see that expression on your face.”

“What?” said Sirius as innocently as he could manage, which wasn’t very.

“The just got laid smirk. Take yourself off and be smug some –” James’ face changed, closed off, and he shifted position to make the extra inches he had on Sirius count, “ – so there better not be a repeat of this behaviour, do you understand me, Black.”

Sirius shrunk down and tried to subtly glance behind for whoever had come up on them. “Yes,” he whispered. He made to scurry away but James reached out and grabbed his arm. He squeezed it comfortingly and Sirius winced like it hurt.

“Good, I’d hate to have to educate you by experience.” He twisted Sirius’ arm and Sirius whimpered. James laughed and let him go with a shove. “Now take yourself off somewhere out my sight.”

“Yes Professor Potter.” Scrunched in on himself Sirius tried to edge past a disapproving McGonagall and a hem-hemming Umbridge. There was something unpleasant in Umbridge’s expression like she was enjoying Sirius’ misery and was hungry for more.

“Hem-hem, I was hoping to speak to you Professor Black. And you Professor Potter.”

“Certainly,” said James, he gestured down the corridor to his classroom. “Come on in.”
Sirius made another attempt to dodge past the two witches, but Umbridge was standing so that he would have to physically push past her.

“I might as well speak to you both at once. You are only part-time professors after all. We should be able to complete the Audit in double quick time.”

Sirius glanced up at James, not sure what approach would be best. James shrugged his shoulders,

“Sure if that’s what you. Come on Black, looks like I’ll have to put up with you a bit longer.” He grabbed Sirius’ upper arm, levered him in front and shoved him in the direction of the Law Classroom, so he was out of Umbridge’s direct line of sight. Which was kind because it made Sirius feel dirty, the way her eyes lit up at his resigned cringe.

He led the way to the classroom as behind him James said,

“I am only an assistant Professor, Madam Umbridge, but I would like to point out that I have been arguing for some time that Wizarding Law should be a standard core class.”

“Professor Potter, we have already discussed this at length,” McGonagall began grumpily, because all the regular staff were sick to death of James’ hobby horse. (Sirius was guiltily sick of it too, not that he thought James was wrong, he just thought they weren’t going to get anywhere right now. He still supported his best friend when the subject came up, mostly by saying he thought it was a bad idea so that the world’s tendency to contradict everything he said could be put to good use. They’d actually double-teamed Sinistra into supporting them with that tactic).

“Hem hem, please Professor McGonagall, let Professor Potter finish. A compulsory Wizarding Law class sounds like it could have potential.”

“Exactly,” enthused James, probably only Sirius could tell how much he disliked agreeing with the woman, “a clear understanding of right and wrong is essential for our students.”

“And penalties and chastisements used to punish malefactors.”

“Obviously,” agreed James as he opened the classroom door and strong-armed Sirius inside before ushering in the ladies with a gallant wave of his arm. “What use is the law without appropriate punishment for those who break it.”

“Exactly, I’m pleased to see someone with such a clear understanding of the issues.”

Then were off on one of the creepiest conversations Sirius had ever been forced to listen to (and given his family, that was saying something). Nobody would have guessed from the way James was sleazing that his thirty year plan included the removal and destruction of the dementors. And Umbridge was eating it up. Judging by how McGonagall was huffing, James might finally be losing his favourite student status.

All impulse to laugh however was snuffed out when Umbridge cast him a coy sideways look and said archly,

“Of course they say the ninth circle of hell is reserved for traitors. Frozen in ice for all eternity, I believe.”

And James looked directly at him cool and cold as a statue, “It’s what all traitors deserve.”

Sirius’ hurt flinch was more honest than he liked.
Harry was surprised how little sneaking it actually took. The portrait outside Neville’s room of a brooding renaissance gentleman swung open with a grumpy thump at the password ‘And yet it moves’. They stepped straight into hidden staircase that took them down through the wall of Gryffindor tower and into a corridor that led around the edge of the castle to a door that Neville whisper promised would open into Sirius office off his classroom.

“There’s no way that can be a coincidence,” said Harry, because the wizarding world was ridiculous but this strained credulity past its limits.

Neville smiled, half-shy, half-sneaky, “Professor McGonagall chose the room for me. She said if there was an emergency I should get to Professor Black’s room as quickly as possible and he’d look after me. She said it might be better not to mention it to my father though because he didn’t like to think about there being an emergency at Hogwarts because it worried him too much. Really she meant my dad would get mad because he doesn’t like Professor Black.”

“So you keep it a secret?”

“Yeah, cos I don’t mind when my dad is mad with me, but I don’t like it when he’s mad with Professor Black.”

“Uh huh.” Harry had the feeling only the last half of that statement was true.

Sirius collapsed back into the armchair he kept in the tiny side room off his Arithmancy classroom. His hands were already starting to shake. He hated it when James was like that, all cold and closed off so it was like he was stuck back in time looking at one of his family. And worse he couldn’t tell James because then James would stop and they couldn’t afford that.

He drew his knees up and hugged them to his chest, but that didn’t help, so he twisted around his seat, gradually transforming into Padfoot. He tucked his nose into his paws and whuffled to himself. It was easier as a dog. It was lonely without hands to pet at his fur, or ruffle his ears, but there were always scents whirling around full of home. Padfoot breathed in deeply and closed his eyes.

He woke with a yelp at the loud creak as the portrait swung back and two sets of footsteps crept inside.

“Snuffles!”

Padfoot skittered off and under the armchair.

“Snuffles, what’s wrong?”

That was Harry, and why had he picked such a ridiculous name anyway. That was in line with some of the suggestions James came up with when Sirius was campaigning for James’ Marauder name to be Bambi.

He poked his head out from under the armchair and whined enquiringly. Harry and Neville clattered across the room.

“Are you alright?” demanded Harry dropping to his knees in front of him. Padfoot accepted the careful hand smoothing across the bones of his face and lowered his head to rest against the floor.
“He’s feeling lonesome,” said Neville. “His family weren’t very nice to him and sometimes he feels lonesome.”

Why had Sirius told Neville that anyway. The story wasn’t even a good example because at least Frank and Alice loved Neville even if they were bloody useless at showing it.

“Oh,” said Harry. He shifted around so he was sitting on the floor with his back to the armchair. “Come here,” he coaxed. Slowly Padfoot crawled out from under the chair and, when Harry did nothing but hum encouragingly, collapsed over Harry’s lap.

“That’s better isn’t,” cooed Harry, “huh, silly creature, if you feel lonesome you should come find me. I’m never going to let you feel lonesome again.”

Neville mumbled something and backed out the room.

Harry’s fingers skritched through his fur. Padfoot lifted his head and licked Harry’s chin in gratitude, then slumped back down because even Harry couldn’t quite dislodge all the lonely ache in his chest.

“It’s okay,” said Harry. “I’m going to make it okay.”

Padfoot nosed mournfully at his fingers. He didn’t deserve Harry’s fierce defence. He wondered how long it would take Harry to realize that. He had upset Harry today showing off with his Arithmancy. Why hadn’t it occurred to him Harry wouldn’t like that. Harry was cat-like with affection, there always a brief hesitation where he checked was this okay, did he like this. Sirius was the dog who’d take affection any way he could get it.

How long it would be before Harry stopped opening his arms to him and instead turned away stiff and cold. When he kept a cool distance only reaching out with the sharp crack of spell fire as if Sirius wasn’t worthy of any touch, not even a slap.

“What do you think about Italy?” asked Harry. The incongruity of the question snapped Padfoot out of his daze. He lifted his head in confusion, was he supposed to think something about Italy?

“Or the South of France, maybe Greece. I’m not fussy. I want somewhere with water so blue it doesn’t look real and sunshine so warm you can’t even remember feeling cold.

Padfoot shivered at the thought of such glorious heat.

“I’ve always wanted to go. Aunt P –, that is my Aunt, she was always ordering fancy holiday brochures. They never went anywhere of course because my Uncle disapproved of foreign rubbish along with everything else. So she had to hide the brochures from him, which meant sometimes I could sneak one. A couple of times, when he nearly caught her, she actually bundled her whole collection into my cupboard to hide them so I got to look through them all before she took them back. Those were especially good days.”

Harry’s voice had gone all hazily soft with the comfort of the memories, “I tore out my favourite pictures, the sea, and the mountains with the sun streaming down. When I could imagine I was in the picture under that sun being stuck in my cupboard didn’t seem so bad.”

Padfoot growled lowly. Sirius did not like how that sounded at all. Jabbing Harry with his paw, Padfoot wuffed enquiringly.

“What?”
Padfoot jabbed him again.

“Oh, my cupboard. People always get het up about that, I don’t know why. I liked living under the stairs. I could hear what was going on and Uncle V-, my Uncle was too big to try and get in without looking like an idiot so he’d only kick the door instead of kicking me. Why are you focusing on my cupboard anyway, when I’m telling you about the sunshine?”

That made sense but something about it itched at Sirius. He put aside to worry over later. It was hard to manage complicated thoughts when he was being Padfoot. Padfoot had no problems moving on from the subject that made Harry’s voice tight and back to talking about the sunshine that left Harry’s touch heavy with dozy content.

He yipped in apology and settled back down.

“So you’ll come with me? I bet Snuffles would love running into the sea.”

Padfoot nodded his head sleepily. It sounded lovely. Then he stopped and whined miserably.

“Yeah, I know we can’t go now, it seems like I can never go now. There are always reasons. But one day, right? One day we could go and do nothing but lounge around in the sunshine and swim occasionally. It’s possible, isn’t? Someday?” Harry’s voice had gone low and wistful, as if even though he wanted to, he couldn’t believe.

Padfoot whined in sympathy. And then thought, well why not. Obviously not now but later. Sirius had lost any conception of what later might look like other than safety, finally, finally blessed safety. But there could be more than safety, couldn’t there. There could be sunshine and warmth and Harry.

Padfoot barked sharply and sat up to put his paws on Harry’s shoulders and lick his face.

Startled, Harry laughed, “Oh, that’s a yes then. Yeah? You think we can make it?”

Padfoot barked in agreement, yes, yes, yes. Then he pushed Harry over so he could chew on his hair.

Neville watched Mr Harry fuss over Padfoot. He remembered Professor Black telling him his family made him feel lonesome, but Neville didn’t think that was quite right. Professor Black wasn’t always lonesome, the way he would be if it was because of his family.

Professor Black’s family were always mean to him, they were so mean he had run away when he was sixteen to live with Professor Potter and his family. (Neville occasionally imagined running away but he didn’t have any friends he could go and live with. He'd thought about living in the muggle world, but he wasn’t sure how and nobody had let him take muggle studies. Professor Black told him he was all out of date anyway and when it was safe he’d take Neville for a visit so he could see for himself. Neville sometimes wanted to ask if Professor Black would go and live in the muggle world, he always managed to stop himself because imagining was nicer than hearing no.)

Professor Black was only lonesome when Professor Potter was mean to him. Professor Potter was frustrating, usually he was nice, but sometimes he said mean things. Neville remembered how kind Professor Black was and took hold of his determination in both hands. He could do this.

Professor Potter’s classroom was only one short flight of stairs away. Neville hadn’t thought about
it before, but like Mr Harry said that probably wasn’t a coincidence either. Professor Potter was so frustrating.

Neville knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Professor Potter called. He sounded grumpy but Neville wasn’t deterred – because he always sounded grumpy until he realized it was Neville or Professor Black – and opened the door.

“How can I – Neville? What are you doing here?” Professor Potter stood up and quickly walked towards him, peering over Neville’s head and into the corridor. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” said Neville.

Professor Potter looked down at him, his eyes quick and intent, “Are you alright? What’s the matter?”

Neville straightened his robe carefully and took a deep breath so he could explain things properly. Despite himself the words came out in a rush,

“You have to stop being mean to Professor Black. It’s not fair.”

Professor Potter sighed, and dropped down into a crouch in front of him, “Neville, I know some things can be difficult to make sense of but Sirius, Professor Black, understands, I promise.” He placed one large gentle hand on Neville’s shoulder, “You don’t need to worry.”

Neville glared, “He’s sad and being Padfoot. He only does that when you’re mean to him.”

“No Sirius is often Padfoot. He races round the grounds with you as Padfoot all the time.”

“You’re not listening to me.” Neville folded his arms and glared as hard as he could. “He’s sad and being Padfoot.”

“He does that too.”

“Yes, when you’re mean.”

Professor Potter tilted his head to one side, “No, he,” then Professor Potter stopped and took off his glasses, rubbing between his eyebrows like it hurt.

“Neville, is he often sad and Padfoot?”

“Yes,” burst out of Neville and then he backtracked. “Sometimes. Sometimes we don’t race around the garden, sometimes we sit behind the lilac bushes and Padfoot is lonesome. I know,” Neville stopped abruptly. “Anyway it isn’t because of his family because you’re always lonesome when you’re a disappointment,” Neville’s voice wobbled and he stopped again. He took a deep breath. “Padfoot is only sad after meetings when you’re mean to him.”

“Shit,” said Professor Potter. And then he swooped on Neville picking him right up into a tight hug. He didn’t understand why, because he was being cross with Professor Potter, but Professor Potter gave good hugs, almost as good as Professor Black, and their hugs were always safe, they never suddenly jabbed their fingers in Neville’s ribs to keep him sharp for next time. It made Neville sad that Professor Potter’s little boy had been killed. He would have been so lucky to have Professor Potter for a dad. Even if Professor Potter was very frustrating sometimes.

“I’m sorry Neville. Your parents are…” He stopped and put Neville back down. He tapped his
glasses against his chin for a moment, and then slid his glasses back on.

“Okay, do you remember a time when you were so scared it was hard to think?”

Neville squinted suspiciously but Professor Potter had never before asked him trick questions like that in order to tell him he’d got everything wrong, so after a moment he reluctantly nodded. And Professor Potter didn’t say that Neville should never be scared like he was mostly expecting, instead Professor Potter said,

“Well your parents are scared for you, and that makes it hard for them to think.”

“Auror Shacklebolt always says you shouldn’t let scared do your thinking for you.”

“And he’s right. But it’s not always that easy. Your parents are trying their very best for you Neville.”

An evil disloyal thought flickered into life in Neville’s head, his best was never good enough, so why should his parents’ best be good enough. Neville stamped on that thought as hard as he could.

Professor Potter sighed again, “I am sorry Neville, I’ve tried talking to them. And Sirius has too. It will get better I promise.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” said Neville, and surprised himself with how weird and tight his voice sounded. “I want you to stop being mean to Professor Black.”

“Well I can manage that at least. Come on let’s go find that stupid mutt.”

Padfoot yelped in alarm as the door swung open. It was supposed to be warded. He shifted to stand guard over Harry and snarled in warning.

“Calm down and quit being a drama queen,” said James.

Padfoot whisked his tail once, then he remembered and he sunk to the floor with a thump, tail curled in, ears down.

“Shit,” said James, “Neville was right.”

James sounded angry. Padfoot ground his belly lower into the floor.

“Come here,” snapped James. “Come here right now.”

Padfoot skittered forward, dancing from side to side with reluctance, but inexorably moving forwards because Padfoot would always take contact over non-contact no matter what sort. Finally he was at James’ feet.

“You are in such trouble. You are in such, such trouble.” James scolded, his voice shaky. But Padfoot found it hard to care because James had crouched down and was ruffling his hands through Padfoot’s fur all along his back and sides. He yipped happily.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you stupid mutt?”

Padfoot had no idea what he was talking about so he worried at James’ shoe laces and yipped again.
“Why didn’t you tell it me it upset you so bad? You never felt upset when I grabbed –,” James stopped, “oh I am stupid, I am so stupid. I have known you for twenty-five years, how could I have been so unforgivably stupid.”

That wasn’t right, James was an idiot but he wasn’t stupid. Padfoot growled and backed up a couple of steps. Then he shook himself all over from wiggly tail to shaggy head because that always made James laugh.

“You stupid idiot.” James sat down on the floor. “Come here, you ambulatory rug.” Padfoot went back for more pets. “Now listen to me,” said James as he rubbed behind his ears, “you are supposed to tell me things. Things like, I hate it when you call me names while being distant because it reminds me of my thrice-damned family.”

Padfoot whimpered and shook his head. Sirius knew how important the pretence was.

“Idiot,” James tugged at his fur but not hard, “If you tell me things we can fix them. We can work around this easy as anything. I might be squeamish about having my best friend flinching away from me as if my touch just hurt him, but I can put up with it. At least I can tell you’re okay because your magic always sparks like static shock when you’re actually upset.”

Padfoot tilted his head to one side as he looked at James and thought maybe he should turn back into Sirius for this conversation.

“Don’t bother,” said James as he heaved himself to his feet. “We’ll go through it again later. At length. For now go reassure your boyfriend so he stops planning how to kill me.”

James was so silly. Harry wasn’t going to kill him. Still, he romped over to Harry, and pressed his nose into Harry’s hands, then over to Neville to bump against his legs, and then back to James. Where he rose up onto his hind paws and dropped his front paws on James’ shoulders so he could lick his face.

“You do realize I know you only do this because it makes you as tall as me for a change?”

Padfoot yipped. Silly James, that was the whole point.

Harry decided he wasn’t going to kill James Potter after all as Padfoot barked happily and ran around the room.

“Do you know a decent silencing charm,” asked James. “Because now would be a good time to cast one.”

Harry cast the Silent Tent on the room which had a draping dampening effect, but only one way. It was easy to break or cut through, but if somebody was going to that sort of bother, they were already in trouble.

Padfoot let loose a flurry of barks in approval.

“Good choice,” said James. His appraising stare made Harry shift uneasily. He wondered how much he had given away with that choice. It wasn’t exactly a basic spell.

“Now since we’re all here,” James continued, “I thought we’d have a go at helping Neville with his Patronus charm. I don’t like to pressure you Neville, but it really is exceptionally useful for carrying messages, particularly in emergencies.”
Neville’s shoulders hunched up and he backed away a couple of steps. Padfoot dashed over to him and pressed up close in an attempt at comfort. Neville’s hand stroked the dark fur.

“Just give it a try,” said James. “You were very brave just now. So can you be brave again and try.”

Looking almost yellow with anxiety, Neville waved his wand and cast.

It was a good effort. Harry was rather an authority on teaching the Patronus Charm and Neville had the intonation and wand movements exactly right. The silver mist poured from his wand and Harry could almost see the shape of Neville’s Patronus, and then abruptly the spell shut off.

“Sorry,” muttered Neville.

“That was really good,” James praised. “Try again and see if you can hold it just a little longer.”

Neville did, and again the spell shut off sharply just before the Patronus formed.

“Sorry.”

Padfoot yelped and wound his way around Neville nudging at him with his nose.

“It’s okay. I guess I’m just no good at it.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. Neville didn’t sound defeated, he sounded stubborn. Harry looked at the still fading swirls of silver magic, and then back at Neville patting Padfoot on the head. Harry smacked his forehead as realization struck.

“Neville,” he said patiently. “You can let your Patronus form. It won’t give anything away to anyone who doesn’t already know about Padfoot.”

Both James and Padfoot turned to look at him. Harry scowled at them,

“For goodness’ sake, what form did you think Neville’s Patronus was going to take?” Neville who fled when his father appeared, but had Professor Black as his favourite teacher.

Padfoot still looked confused, but James nodded,

“You’re right, it’s completely obvious. Neville, Harry’s right. If Padfoot is your Patronus you can let him form. It won’t give the secret away.”

Neville managed a shaky smile, and Padfoot nudged him encouragingly. Neville lifted his wand again.

“Expecto patronum!” With nothing holding it back, silver smoke leapt from the wand immediately transforming into a silver copy of the big black dog. Padfoot barked at it and the silver dog barked soundlessly back.

“Well done Neville,” said James. “That was excellent work. Frank will be pleased.” Then he muttered, “Not that it will stop him going completely off his rocker if he ever figures it out.”

He spoke too low for Neville, distracted by the two dogs feinting at each other, to hear but Harry caught it. James looked sharply at him, and Harry nodded. Yes, if Neville’s parents ever figured it out, Harry would keep an eye on things.

The two Padfoots were now chasing each other happily around the room, making Neville giggle.
“So,” James said, “I was hoping I’d catch you.”

Harry very nearly said, at what. James made him cautious. He could recognize the ruthlessness in the man because it was a ruthlessness he shared.

“What can I do for you,” Harry said, smiling extra cheerfully.

James laughed. “You can smile like that at Snape. It will make his head explode.”

“Always happy to oblige.”

“And I’d like you to consider coming to a meeting this evening.”

“I have work.”

“Rosemerta can manage without you for the evening. You can come late if you like, eight-thirty.”

“And why do I want to attend this meeting?”

“You don’t,” said James, and Harry gave him points for bluntness. “It will be a total pain. Sirius was going to skip out altogether. But I think I need you both there. Things are starting to change, I can smell it on the wind. And if I’ve picked it up, Dumbledore definitely has. So please, come to the Order meeting for me.”

“What Order?” Harry asked, although he was sure he already knew.

“The Order of the Phoenix.”

“That sounded like it needed a drum roll. Do Phoenixes have orders?”

“Not generally. They’re usually highly solitary creatures focused on their magic without much interest in humans,” James’ voice slowed down, then stopped. “And I never quite thought of it that way before. Moving swiftly on because I can only deal with one horrific revelation a day, the Order of the Phoenix is dedicated to the destruction of you-know-who.”

“I thought the wizarding world in general was in favour of that.”

“I wish I had a better answer for you than, yes but –”

“It’s fine. A secretive order doesn’t sound shady at all. How did you get involved?”

“We were recruited just after we left Hogwarts.”

“Recruiting school children. Sounding even less shady by the minute.”

“Yeah.” James shook his head, “Still we’re in, and there’s no real getting out with you-know-who on the loose.”

“No, I understand. Tell me more about your not-at-all shady Order.”

“It’s not my Order. Dumbledore’s in charge and Frank’s second because of Neville. But because of Neville, Frank’s tried to keep the Ministry away. And I can’t really blame him, I wouldn’t want the Ministry interfering in how my son was educated, though I’m not sure how they could be worse at it.”

Harry could almost see James’ bite down a rant.
“Not my point. My point is that Frank has been generally obnoxious to the Ministry until we’ve lost any sort of relationship and have no influence at all. Frank’s an Auror but I think they only keep him on to keep an eye on him.”

“That sounds like maybe not the best plan.”

“Exactly. The Ministry should be our ally. We should be working together, or at least walking in the same direction. If you-know-who manages to capitalize on the tension between the Ministry and the Order we’ll be sunk. I was an Auror until, well just until, so Madam Bones knows me. Madam Bones is head of the Magical Law Enforcement Department,” he added helpfully.

“Shouldn’t she be in charge of destroying you-know-who?”

“Technically she is. That’s what makes it all so ridiculous. Somebody needs to talk to her, explain where we are and work with her. In the absence of anyone else, I’ve nominated myself.”

“Fair enough.”

“But I need at least a modicum of agreement from Dumbledore and Frank which I’m not going to get unless,” he gestured to Harry.

“You think I can persuade them?” Harry had no idea how that would work except badly.

“No I think you can distract them enough that they don’t realize what they’re agreeing too.”

Harry grinned goblin-like, “Oh yeah. Yeah, distraction I can definitely do.”
Padfoot turned in a nervous circle after his silver mirror-image vanished. Sirius had no idea how to deal with being Neville’s Patronus, god but the poor kid must be completely desperate, but he knew he couldn’t ignore. So he forced Padfoot up onto his hind legs and slowly transformed back into Sirius.

Neville blinked at him, nervous but hopeful.

“Well done. That was a really strong Patronus.”

The proud smile on Neville’s face made biting back the demand to pick someone more reliable worth it. He might have tried to say something anyway, but he was distracted by James and Harry obviously plotting at the other end of the room.

Introducing them was perhaps not the best idea, they were both clearly natural agents of chaos. (Most people did not realize this about James. They always tutted over the wild young Black heir who dragged that nice Potter boy into such outrageous scrapes. Sirius swore it was the glasses, James would peer owlishly out from behind his glasses and even people who should know better, like McGonagall, would pat him on the arm and tell him not to let Black lead him astray next time. Which was so unfair when Sirius was completely, or well mostly, at least fifty percent anyway, innocent.)

James dispatched Neville to show his parents’ his success and put them in a good for the meeting tonight, Harry to go and find his shoes –

“Oh why do you have no shoes on?” Sirius demanded. His Pafoot brain hadn’t thought it odd because the office felt like home, but this was Hogwarts, and Harry shouldn’t be running around in his socks. “Did they fall apart?”

All Harry’s gear was hard-used and appeared to be held together with spells and willpower. Sirius was getting twitchy with the desire to buy him a whole new wardrobe.

“No, I just took them off so I could climb the Tower.”

“You climbed the Tower?” Sirius demanded, panicked despite the fact Harry had clearly succeeded.

James laughed, the sod, “The pair of you will finish me off. Don’t pull that face at me, Pads, at least Harry was sober.”

“Hey,” Sirius yelped. “We agreed we weren’t going to talk about that.”

“I remember no such agreement.”

He pursed his lips, “So does that mean I can mention the time you drank half a bottle of firewhiskey and –” James’ hands smacked down over his face.

“Not unless you want me to tell Harry about that time in fifth year.”

Sirius fought his way free, “What time in – oh, that time.”
James grinned at him.

“Fine,” he folded his arms sulkily. James grinned harder.

“Harry,” James asked, “Can you get back down the walls without smashing yourself up?”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Can you go back to the village and get sorted for tonight?”

“Yeah. Any other orders?” Harry’s voice had an edge to it.

James shook his head, “Nope, I was going to suggest a role for you to play but I think you’ll be disruptive enough as yourself to derail any dozen meetings. You putting effort into it would definitely be overkill, probably literally.”

“It’s like you know me.”

“I know Sirius, that will have to do for now.”

“I –” Sirius started because it sounded like this was a conversation he should have been involved in. But Harry bounced over to him and gave him a kiss. It was an affectionate quick kiss to one cheek, a couple kiss to say bye. It was so nice Sirius was too distracted to do anything but smile at Harry.

“You’re still coming for dinner?” Harry checked.

“Yes, I’ll be there. Then it sounds like we’re going to the meeting which was not what I planned for this evening.”

Harry joined him in glaring at James.

James laughed at them, “You’ll live. Besides think how much fun you’ll have been disruptive.”

Harry stopped glaring and looked thoughtful.

“Are you seriously having to think about this?” Sirius demanded, putting his hands on his hips and lifting his head to look as affronted as possible.

“What?” Harry blinked at him innocently, “Are you not looking forward to being disruptive?”

“Well,” Sirius smiled back, slow and deliberate. “Maybe.”

James groaned, “I’m suddenly realizing that I did not think this through nearly enough.”

“Too late now Jay.”

“If anyone gets challenged to a duel, I am not standing second.”

Harry grinned, “Duels? I’m a muggle, we take things outside and settle them with our fists, like men. Not with poncy wand-waving.”

James collapsed with a howl of laughter, “Oh Merlin, I will pay you to say that. Oh god, Frank’s face.” The thought of Frank’s expression at such a challenge had Sirius choking on his own laughter.
“Was it something I said?” asked Harry, all sweet innocence.

Sirius couldn’t get control of himself to do more than flail helplessly.

“You are both very weird,” Harry scolded. “I’ll see you later Sirius.” Then he went head first out the window, scuttling down the wall like a crab.

“Sirius,” James said conversationally, when they’d recovered their breath. “Have you noticed that your boyfriend is a little bit cracked in the head?”

“Meh,” said Sirius. They were all a little bit cracked in the head.

Still grinning to himself, Harry collected his shoes and spelled his socks clean. They were suffering a bit, another few Scourgifys and they’d start fraying. Maybe Madam Rosmerta would let him have some of his wages in advance so he could another couple of pairs.

Back at the Three Broomsticks he explained about the meeting and Rosmerta agreed he could attend.

“Of course you must go. I expect you’ll be spending more and more time up at the school.”

“Oh no, this is favour to James, Professor Potter. Otherwise I wouldn’t be going at all.”

“You should be going up to the school. You should have been picked up by the Muggle-born Scholarship program. I don’t know how they missed you.”

“Too late now,” said Harry cheerfully. “Now if I’m going out tonight, I can watch the bar for the rest of this afternoon so you can do other stuff. Wait, Sirius is coming for dinner, I want to cook something for him, can I go grab some stuff first?”

“Uh,” Rosmerta seemed to take a moment to parse what he’d said. Perhaps he’d been speaking in a bit of a rush, but he wanted to cook something for Sirius and not the same thing wizards always ate. Something special. Like Sirius. He bounced twice impatiently.

Rosmerta smiled bemusedly, “That all sounds fine Harry. But you know we have a whole bunch of supplies in the cellar you’re welcome to use.”

“That’s kind of you but there’s nothing there that I’m looking for. Or in the Grocers shop down the road. It’s like the Wizarding World has never heard of garlic.”

“Garlic? Harry why are you worrying about vampires?”

Harry groaned in disgust, “That’s it, I’m making you dinner too. There’s so much more to garlic than vampires.”

“If you say so,” Rosmerta did not look convinced.

“Hah,” said Harry. Then he apparated away, he had supplies to buy.

It took him a while to track down a market. He only had a handful of muggle coins but that was enough to buy some veggies. He really wanted to make Sirius moussaka because was the most amazing food ever invented but he’d need to round up some money before then. For now he’d stick with ratatouille, which was ridiculously easy to make and ridiculously tasty.
After pinging around for a bit like a pinball, he was back in the Three Broomsticks with a bag of supplies beaming at Rosmerta,

“All sorted.”

Rosmerta started to say something, then stopped and shook her head, “I’m not even going to ask. I’m going round to Margaery’s. Be as good as you can manage.”

“That doesn’t sound like you have lot of faith in me.”

“Harry child, I have enormous faith in you and your ability to get into trouble.”

“I haven’t even done anything yet.”

“It’s the yet that’s worrying me.”

Sirius had endured a long lecture, hell it was practically a dissertation, about how he was an idiotic moron who would tell his best friend next time he was upset, and just because James didn’t like feeling he was giving his best friend bruises, was no reason for Sirius to suffer through feeling like James had turned into the Black family.

“I swore I’d never do that to you,” said James, very white about the mouth.

Sirius bit his lip, “I’m sorry James.”

“You should be. Oh shit, come here you idiot. No don’t turn into Padfoot. Shut up and take your cuddles like a man.”

“And you say Harry’s a bit cracked in the head.” Sirius crawled over to where James was sitting, leaning back against the wall, and tucked himself in under James’ welcoming arm. “I am sorry, Jay,” he whispered.

“It’s okay, yeah, I’ll get over it. Just don’t do it again or I’ll bring out the big guns.”

“Oh god no.”

“Yep, all of them.”

“Please don’t.”

“You going to be good?”

Sirius nodded frantically, banging his head against James’ chest.

“Alright then. We’ll see.”

They sat there for a bit just breathing in each other’s presence like they were eleven again. Finally Sirius asked,

“Why’d you ask Harry to the meeting tonight? You know I wanted to keep him clear of all that.”

“And I agreed with you before I met him.” James sighed, “He burns with power Sirius. He’s not going to stay out of things, certainly not as long as you’re involved. And they won’t let him stay out of things even if he was inclined to. You-know-who must want him back. Merlin alone knows
how he escaped in the first place.”

“I think his Neville, the one who died, helped.”

“That would make sense. Poor kid. And Dumbledore, he’s not going to let an asset like Harry hang around Hogsmeade not being used. Let’s not forget either, that Snape will make things as difficult as possible. What we do not need is Dumbledore trying to get leverage on Harry.”

Sirius considered the idea for a moment, “I really don’t think Harry would react well to that.”

“No kidding he wouldn’t. And neither would I because Dumbledore is bound to try and use you.”

“So what, you want Harry to just show up?”

“Actually I did a good job of talking Dumbledore around into persuading me to bully you – not that he phrased it that way of course – into getting Harry to the meeting.”

“So they’ll think it’s their own idea. That will work nicely. They’d be suspicious if Harry just showed up begging for entry.”

“Right, but they also need to see Harry, to get used to him before you-know-who plays his next hand. He shows up at a few meetings and hangs around drinking tea and eating too many biscuits and they’ll forget how suspicious he is. A couple of fights with the death eaters and they’ll forget he wasn’t always part of the furniture. And if he can distract Dumbledore long enough for me to extract an agreement that I can talk to Bones, well that will be an excellent bonus.”

“Why didn’t you tell Harry any of this?”

“Because I wanted him to agree to come. He wouldn’t agree to anything if it was to try and secure his own safety, he’d probably do the opposite, no wait he’d definitely do the opposite. And if I tried to use your safety to force him, or force him in any way at all, you’d throw me out the fourth floor window, several times.”

Sirius rubbed the bridge of his nose. It wasn’t like James was wrong exactly. “You realize I’m going to tell Harry all this?”

“Duh.”

“But –”

“He’s already agreed to come. And he seems kind of attached to being a distraction. I’m hoping that will circumvent his kneejerk refusal.”

“But then why even tell me and Harry this before the meeting?”

“As I keep saying, I’m putting considerable effort into not getting killed by your boyfriend.”

Sirius rolled his eyes, “Fine, don’t tell me. You be all Machi-whasit.”

James laughed.

Harry had the ratatouille on to cook, retrieved his book on courting, and set himself up with paper and pen behind the counter so he could watch the bar and take notes at the same time.
The Three Broomsticks seemed to be adjusting to his presence. While people still looked him over when they ordered, they seemed willing to discuss other subjects too and some other scandal had risen up to knock him off the top spot. So Harry kept his head down and made his notes.

Killing a dragon seemed to be the main option, but Harry felt that was rather hard on the dragon. He wasn’t sure Sirius would appreciate it either. If he was going the route of a large rotting carcass then Voldemort seemed a better choice, even if the book kept yattering on about dragons.

It also seemed wise to start smaller. Give Sirius chance to get used to the idea of Harry becoming a permanent fixture. That way he could build up to the big gesture. Whereas if he tried a big gesture and Sirius said no, he’d be stuck. Harry didn’t want to spend the next five years slaughtering dragons from here to Romania.

He flicked through the book looking for smaller gestures. It wasn’t the clearest of books. Jousting was mentioned a lot but Harry didn’t think that could be much of a thing anymore because if it was he was sure he’d have heard Malfoy boasting about it. Unless wizards jousted on broomsticks, that actually sounded amazingly fun.

He wrote down ‘Take Sirius jousting’ and carried on flicking through the pages. This was a really useful book.

He found an interesting bit on gloves, apparently giving someone your gloves was thing. He wasn’t quite sure why, and then he thought about slipping on Sirius’ gloves still warm from Sirius clever, deft hands, and okay, Harry totally got why gloves were a thing.

He was just noting down gloves, all caps triple-underlined, when there was a sudden spreading quiet across the Three Broomsticks. Harry put down his pen and book and looked up in time to see Snape storm up to the counter. Snape thumped his fist down on the bar and demanded, “Coffee, now!”

Harry smiled as brightly as he knew how, and said in his most sing-song customer service voice, “I’m sorry sir, we are all out of coffee now. All we have left is coffee please.”

Hastily muffled laughter swept across the room. Several loud whisperers repeated the line for those who missed it.

Snape’s face whitened and twisted with fury. Harry looked at him and was suddenly struck by how pettily small the man was. The image layed itself back over the other Snape who’d stalked through Harry’s childhood like a giant and it staggered him. Snape claimed his life had been destroyed by bullying but he was perfectly happy to bully the children in his charge. Whatever you said about the Marauders at least they’d been the same age as Snape. What chance had poor Neville had.

And then he loved Harry’s mother, uh huh, if you say so. That would be why he treated her son like he was something to be crushed. Sure, call it love if that’s what Snape wanted, but it had been nothing in the face of his hatred for James Potter so it was a pretty poor sort of love in Harry’s opinion. Frankly he was insulted on his mother’s behalf, she deserved better.

“Can I help you, sir,” he chirped.

“Of course Black took up with the village idiot.”

“If you do not wish to make a purchase at this time, sir, please stand aside so others may reach the counter.”
“Listen, you imbecile,” he leaned across the counter and grabbed a fistful of Harry’s sweater. Harry grabbed his wrist in return and then just stood there. Snape yanked backwards, but Harry simply didn’t move. Then Snape’s fist let go as he yanked backwards, so Harry let go and watched the man trip and nearly fall.

“If that’s everything sir.” And he pulled his book back out, though he kept watching Snape from under his lashes.

Thacker, one of the older customers, called out,

“Leave the boy alone Snape. You were always getting in over your head even as a lad.”

“I will not,” seethed Snape. His wand was in his hand. Harry looked back up at him,

“I’m sorry sir, no raised wands while in the Three Broomsticks, Madam Rosmerta was very clear.” He held his hand out and Snape’s wand flew across to smack home against his palm. Harry added the wand to the umbrella stand behind the counter. “I’ll pass it back when you leave, sir.”

Snape was now an ugly mixture of purple and white. Harry went back to his book. Snape loomed in on him, one hand clutched for Harry’s face and as Harry jerked back, Snape’s other hand snapped out and grabbed the book.

“Let’s see what you’re reading. Trying to get a little culture, make up for the fact you’re nothing but a jumped up muggle.” Snape glanced down at the book and his eyes brightened maliciously, “Oh *courting* are we. How wonderfully *precious*.”

He slammed the book down on the counter, “You do give yourself airs. As if even in its degenerate state, the Lord of the Black family would have any serious interest in wretched muggle trash crawling out the gutter.”

Harry flinched despite his best efforts. That was a little too close to the dark taunting of his own thoughts. It had taken a while for him to understand, in that other world Bill Weasley had finally sat down with and gone through it with him, having dealt with French Wizards and the Goblins, Bill was more aware of the differences in the cultural water they swam through. Family connection was everything in the Wizarding World. Who you could claim as family (not necessarily the people who were your closest blood relatives), who you could claim as a friend (not necessarily the people you hung out with), who would stand surety for you. Those things mattered.

When Sirius rejected his family and fled to the Potters, he lost not only his family but all his family connections and it led to a wrenching rearrangement of the political map, the consequences of which were still playing out. At least half the tension caused by muggle-borns was their unconnected, wildcard status. How could you trust someone with no family standing behind them? And Harry didn’t even have the tenuous friendship connections a muggle-born would build at Hogwarts.

He would never be a good choice for Sirius.

Snape smirked at landing a hit. “You really think there’s anything you can do to make yourself acceptable?”

Harry leaned forward, lip curling back. Very quietly and deliberately he said, “At the very least I’m not part of a terrorist organisation dedicated to the eradication of him and his kind.”

Snape snarled, inhuman. His wand leapt across the counter into his hand. He was as white as a dead thing.
“Out,” yelled Harry, suddenly ashamed and sick of the whole thing. “Get out and stay out.”

The wards Sirius had set surged forward at his command like an angry wave and bundled Snape out the pub. The doors slammed shut with a bang, and a bar that hadn’t existed before dropped into place across them, locking them in place.

Harry dug his fingers into the bar top and heaved for breath liked he’d run a mile.

Sirius wriggled uneasily.

“What?” asked James, yawning as he stretched out his arms.

“Rosie’s wards.”

“Bad?” James rolled up into a crouch, ready to go.

“No, they’re not alarmed. They’re angry.” Sirius wriggled his shoulders again under the strange sensation. The wards were furious. That wasn’t supposed to happen.

“Angry?” James looked as puzzled as he felt. Then his eyes tightened with worry. “Wait, I’ve just had a horrid thought. Where do you think Snape is right now?”

“I’ll kill him,” said Sirius, scrabbling to his feet. “I swear to Merlin, this time I finally will kill him.”

“You can’t kill Snape, he’s not worth feeling guilty over. Now calm down,” James grabbed his shoulders. “Three deep breaths.”

Sirius took three long shuddery breaths.

“Better?”

“Yeah.” The desire to rend Snape limb from limb had faded sufficiently that Sirius could think straight again. “Are you sure I can’t kill him?”

“Fraid so. Go find Harry and see what the matter is. Call me if you need me. And call me if you can’t make the meeting otherwise I’ll come looking.”

“I thought you needed us at the meeting?”

“Yes, but not if one of you is going to tear Snape to pieces, and not if it’s going to tear one of you to pieces. I can cope without you for one meeting. I am quite good at this.”

“Bloody Machi-whatsit-wanker.”

“That’s me.” James grinned smugly. “Now go find your Harry.”
Hi, sorry to let you know but there won't be another update until at least Tuesday as I'm going away for the weekend and won't have access to my computer.

When Harry'd recovered enough to look up, everyone's heads snapped away from him as if they hadn't just been staring at him. He swallowed around his dry throat.

“I apologise,” he said, “that shouldn’t have happened.”

“Don’t worry about it my boy,” said Thacker. “That’s just Snape, never can leave well enough alone. He has to push and push and then complains when it blows up in his hands.”

“Well I’m still sorry.” He shouldn’t have said that to Snape either but it was too late now. With a flick of his wand he unbarred the door. The room was suddenly busy talking too loud.

Harry brushed himself off and with the flat of his hand smoothed out the dents his fingers had dug into the top of the bar.

“I’ve seen enough,” said a portly older gentleman, rising to his feet. “I’m convinced.”

Harry looked at him warily. He was wearing fine robes that pooled around his feet, held an inch or so off the ground with magic to keep them out of the dust. As he walked forward, he carried himself like he owned the world and everyone in it. He was definitely from one of the important families.

“Can I help you sir?” Harry asked cautiously.

“They say you just wandered into the Three Broomsticks one night. That you haven’t any family.”

“I don’t see what business that is of yours.”

“So it’s true then. And now you’ve taken up with that Black boy?”

“Don’t you dare say a bad word about Sirius.”

“Loyal too, it’s nice to see. But you can do better than playing the whore for the last member of a disgraced dying family.”

Harry took a deep breath, he’d just lost his temper spectacularly, he wasn’t going to do it again.

“Stop talking about Sirius. I don’t want to throw you out but I will if you don’t shut up.”

“Now it’s getting a little tiresome. Perhaps you don’t fully grasp what I’m offering you. I am Jasper Greengrass –”

Harry nodded. He must be Daphne’s father.
“– of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. I trust you’re aware of the significance of that.”

“They’re the really stuck up ones.”

Anger flashed across Greengrass’ face. There was a harshness to him now as his magic settled heavily over the room. Harry bared his teeth, after this display he’d no longer feel guilty for using magic on the man.

“Currently I lack a son and heir. I am prepared to offer you the opportunity to adopt you as my heir if you will marry one of my daughters and take my name.”

“Wait, you want me to marry Daphne?”

“Ah, you’ve done your research, it’s nice to see.”

“She’s fifteen!”

“Well, it would take year to arrange a suitable ceremony. And I would expect you to allow her to finish her education at Hogwarts. The connections formed there are important you know. Your lack of them is only compensated for by your being a blank slate upon which we can work our improvements.” He eyed Harry up and down, his lip twisted with disgust. “There will need to be many improvements.”

“Are you completely mad?” Harry had lost his footing in this conversation. He genuinely wasn’t sure which one of them was the crazy person here. Perhaps this time he’d finally gone completely off his rocker and wasn’t even hearing whatever it was that Greengrass was saying that could in no way be as crazy as what Harry was hearing. He rubbed his ears to try and clear them.

“Careful now,” Greengrass warned. “I expected a certain crude vitality but you are beginning to strain my tolerance. I shall expect to see a significant correction in your attitude before the ceremony goes ahead.”

Nope, that was clear as a bell, Harry wasn’t the crazy person here. Good to have that cleared up.

Greengrass continued on, “Come along. Now that something better is available than grubbing around in this establishment,” he sneered around the room, “you need no longer suffer the ignominy of associating with that shameful wreck of a degraded wizard.”

Harry too furious to be angry. He felt eerily calm, “You are so completely batshit it’s kind of terrifying. I wouldn’t give up a chance with Sirius for anything. Certainly not some girl I’ve never even met. And to come in here and speak about Sirius like that – get the hell out before I test what Sirius was saying about the Unforgivables.”

“You forget your place,” Greengrass swung his wand sharply as if it was a crop.

Harry reached out and caught the violent slash of magic with one hand.

“I said, get the hell out of here.” The doors slammed open again.

“You can’t play your muggle tricks on me,” said Greengrass. He raised his wand again.

Harry lifted his hand and the wards leapt howling to his command. He threw his hand forward and on a scream of sound they blew Greengrass right back out the door and into the street.

There was a loud echoing crash as somebody apparated in, and Sirius yelled,
“What the hell did you do, Greengrass?”

“Black! Better train some manners into your mudblood. And quiet that uppity tongue, before someone decides to cut it out.”

A bang of apparition barely muffled the shout of a spell.

“Sirius!” Harry yelled as he ran outside, “Sirius are you alright?”

Lowering his raised wand, Sirius swung round and strode over to him. He clutched Harry tightly, wand still in his hand as he scanned the street,

“Am I alright? What the hell happened! The wards were going insane. Are you alright? What happened? What did he do? Merlin, are you alright?”

“I’m okay,” said Harry. “Calm down, it’s fine.”

“It very clearly isn’t. Let’s get you back inside the wards.” Sirius hustled him towards the door.

“I’m okay,” Harry repeated, touched by how worried Sirius was. “I can look after myself and your wards were fierce.”

Sirius patted the door post as he got them both inside, “Thanks,” Harry could feel the wards rumble contentedly in response. He shut the door. His back twitched under the force of multiple stares, looked like he was back at the top of the gossip list.

“What happened?” Sirius asked again.

“Come through to the back.” Harry glanced around the room, “Is everyone okay for drinks at the moment?”

Everybody’s heads were suddenly focused down at their tables. Harry managed to catch one witch’s eye and she squeaked,

“Uh, yes thank you, all fine, thank you very much.”

“Sorry,” Harry apologised to the room with a tentative wave, he hadn’t meant to freak them all out.

“Eh, screw it, and screw Greengrass,” yelled Harley, who was one of the tougher youths who hung around in the standing section at the far end of the bar. “Coming in here, acting like his shit don’t stink. You told him to shut up or you’d throw him out, he didn’t shut up so you threw him out. Can’t say fairer than that.” A couple of beer glasses were clunked against the bar in agreement. “Think that very thing’s happened to me a time or two, and nobody had much sympathy for me, not that I remember anyhow.”

There was a general shout of laughter and several wits immediately began twitting Harley on his ability to remember anything at all of the nights in question.

Sirius’ frenetic energy eased. He shook his head ruefully, “I have got to hear the story. Come on Harry.”

“Don’t fret yourself,” said Thacker. “Harry was nothing but reasonable and nobody will say any different.”

“Thanks,” said Sirius. He was starting to look over-whelmed. Harry hurried him back into the kitchen and fetched him a glass of pumpkin juice.
“Are you worrying about me?” asked Sirius as Harry watched him anxiously.

Harry nodded.

“You’re unbelievable, come here.” He tugged at Harry’s arm, reeling him until he could rest his arms around Harry’s waist and press his cold nose against Harry’s neck. “I want to hex everyone who even looks at you cross-eyed.”

Harry nodded, that was how he felt exactly.

“What on earth did Greengrass say? I don’t like the man but he’s a fustily correct old bugger, not the sort to torment the help. James and I assumed it was Snape, I guess I owe him an apology.”

“It was Snape first,” explained Harry. “He was rude so I was rude back. Then he,” Harry shifted uncomfortably, “he hit sore point.”

Sirius swore under his breath, “Snape’s good at that, as I can attest.”

“So I, I said at least I hadn’t joined a terrorist organisation dedicated to eradicating you and your kind.”

“Ouch. What the hell did he say? No don’t tell me, I’m sure it will only make me want to thump him and you’ve already given him his licks. I guess somebody filled you in about Lily and Snape?”

Harry could feel himself flush, “I eavesdrop,” he admitted. Because he did, and because it would hopefully cover any other knowledge he wasn’t supposed to have.

“Sneaky cat.” Sirius gently flicked his finger along Harry’s cheekbone. “Still Snape was the one who ranted the story all around the village so he can’t complain if it came back to bite him. Actually scratch that, Snape complains the loudest when something comes back to bite him.”

“Shush, I feel bad, I didn’t mean to say it.”

“Don’t feel too bad. That’s Snape all over. He picks at you until you’ve no idea what you’re saying just that it might make him leave you alone. James is the only one who can deal with him.”

Harry huffed.

“So Snape left?”

“I threw him out.”

“Oh God, he’s going to be climbing the walls this evening. I should call James and tell him to save himself while there’s still time.”

“No, we’re going to be the distraction.”

“Yeah James told me to tell you – or rather he didn’t because he was being Machi-whatsit, but that was what he meant – that he mostly wanted you to go because he wants the Order to get used to you so they don’t decide you’re too dangerous and need to be controlled.”

“That would go really, really badly,” said Harry tightly.

“Oh I know, so does James, but you can’t tell some people anything. And I’d rather they didn’t decide you were dangerous, because that could go all kinds of wrong for you. But James didn’t think that would convince you, and he knew I’d throw a fit if he’d tried to convince you I’d be in
danger, because I wouldn’t be. Honest. Too much time has passed now for Dumbledore to threaten me with Azkaban again. So you don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

Harry scowled. James was very definitely Machi-whatist. Sirius hadn’t even noticed that James had very effectively used him to convey the threat to his own safety in order to force Harry into playing nice for the Order. If Azkaban was even remotely on the cards, Harry would follow along. Even if every instinct screamed that he should tell James to go to hell.

“Why did he tell you this anyway?”

“Dunno. He wouldn’t tell me. He said some nonsense about not wanting you to kill him.”

Harry smiled. He was no fonder of being manipulated than ever, but at least James recognized he was capable of deciding for himself. And, just possibly, he might admit that he probably wouldn’t have listened all that well if James had tried to explain it to him directly. There was even a small, incely-wincey, chance he might have lost his temper. Oh alright, if anyone other than Sirius had mentioned Azkaban Harry knew he would have exploded and he was very tired of being angry.

“He must have some James-reason. Jay is much better at the political shit than I am.”

“Yeah,” Harry let himself relax against Sirius. “No politics at all?”

“Too much like my family. James finds it all fascinating but me, the first meaningful silence and I want to scream.”

“Poor Sirius.”

“I know. And sometimes James explains thing to me which is even worse. It’s like chess but with three boards and twice the number of pieces.”

“Chess gives me a headache. I had a friend who was great at it, I always tried to lose pieces in exchange as fast as possible so there were less blasted pieces on the board.”

“Oh, me too. James figured it out and won’t play with a heathen like me anymore. Which is a shame, if you can get down to two or three pieces each it’s quite fun. We should play some time.”

“Backgammon instead,” Harry offered hopefully.

“If you like, mostly I was thinking of Jay’s face when I tell him we stayed up all night playing chess.”

Harry smirked, “Oh well in that case, sign me up.”

“Great.” Sirius stepped back and rubbed his forehead. “Alright let’s get back on track. You threw Snape out. And Greengrass, objected to this?” Sirius sounded puzzled, clearly unconvinced by the idea.

“No, I think he rather approved actually. He wanted me to,” Harry looked at his feet, embarrassed, “He wanted me to marry his daughter and become his heir,” he mumbled, still over-whelmed by the craziness of it.

“Oh,” said Sirius.

“Then we argued a bit.”

“Oh,” said Sirius again. “I should have thought of that.” He drifted back from Harry.
“Sirius?” Harry tried to follow him, but Sirius, backed up against the kitchen counter, simply boosted himself up to sit on the counter, cowering away from Harry. Harry took a hasty step back because he didn’t want to crowd Sirius.

“It’s okay,” said Sirius.

Harry ground his teeth. It was obviously not okay. “Sirius?”

Sirius shrugged his shoulders and smiled painfully at him, “It’s okay.”

Harry rubbed his knuckles against his mouth and thought fast, “Sirius could explain how this adoption thing works. It wasn’t very clear.”

It was fascinating to watch, even though he was hunched up and miserable, Sirius didn’t seem able to stop himself from leaning forward and starting to explain,

“Magical adoption is the acceptance of the adoptee into the family’s magic. It’s more extreme version of the marriage ceremony. All muggle-borns used to be magically adopted into one of the existing magical families as a matter of course but that stopped in the nineteenth century because, actually Wizarding reactions to the Scientific Revolution aren’t strictly relevant right now,”

“Tell me about it later,” begged Harry.

“If you like. It’s mostly people being idiots but a distressingly large amount of history is like that.” Sirius had stopped looking miserable and there was an explainy light in his eyes. "So magical adoption is now mostly used when a Head of a Family only has daughters. If he wants to avoid his gloating cousin inheriting, he’ll arrange the marriage of his eldest daughter to a suitable wizard, magically adopt said wizard and bang, instant heir.”

“And his daughter doesn’t mind?”

“Not usually. She gets to remain the Lady of the Family, instead of being shunted to one side by the gloating cousin and his wife. The problem though is finding a suitable wizard. If they’re from the same level of society as you, their own Head is likely to remain dominant despite the adoption and you risk your family becoming a mere adjunct to the original family.

“Someone from the rank below you, well everyone knows your son-in-law is an inferior, and they’re likely to want to improve things for their original family, so you end up supporting the whole lot. This works well enough if it’s only a small family but if you’re not careful you end up provided patronage for stacks of hopeful cousins.

“Someone from the bottom tier is obviously,” Sirius rolled his eyes, “out of the question. A half-blood is even worse, you have all the disadvantages of a magical family, and they’re part-muggle. But sometimes, if you can find a powerful-enough muggle-born, the lack of family can work to your advantage. Which must be what Greengrass was thinking.”

Sirius wilted again and stopped talking to chew at his thumb.

“So I’d be like a clean slate,” said Harry

“Exactly. No other family to cause him problems. And you haven’t gone to Hogwarts so none of your peers have spent the last seven years looking down on you.”

“He made not going to Hogwarts sound like a disadvantage.”
“Not in this case. There’s nobody who can tell stories about that time you were eleven and fell off your broom, or screamed blue murder when Peeves jumped out at you. They can’t even make up those sort of stories because you weren’t there. Nobody has a claim on you. Frankly, you’re the answer to his prayers. No wonder he rushed up here to check out the rumours so fast.”

“Great,” said Harry blankly. He didn’t understand why any of this meant Sirius was sitting on the counter pushed back as far away from him as possible.

Hitching his left foot up onto the counter, Sirius wrapped his arm around his shin and pulled his folded leg in tightly against his chest,

“Also it’s easy enough to claim a muggle-born is actually descended from a magical family. You look enough like a Black. And there’s me. Greengrass, he probably figures you could persuade me to claim you as a Black.”

“Right.” Harry understood this was all important, he just had no idea how it was important or what Sirius was actually saying. He beginning to get annoyed.

Tilting his head forward Sirius let his hair flop over his face and peeked out at Harry from behind his knee,

“I would, you know, if you wanted me to. You wouldn’t have to persuade me.”

“Good, I guess.” Harry waved his hands in exasperation. “Sirius, what are you talking about?”

Sirius picked at the loose threads around the ankle of his jeans. “About how you’re going to marry Daphne Greengrass. She’s a nice girl. She could do a hell of a lot worse.”

“What! What the hell? I’m not going to marry Daphne. I just threw her father out into the street, for Merlin’s sake.”

“Oh, well you could probably apologize. Greengrass is pretty desperate.”

“And I thought he was the crazy one. Sirius, what on earth are you going on about?”

“The Greengrass’s. They’re an important family. Wealthy, of course. Neutralish. Well-respected. Secure. You’d be mad not to grab this opportunity with both hands.”

“Sirius, I’m not,” Harry tried to reach for Sirius, but Sirius yanked his other leg up and scooted back until he hit the wall. “Sirius, you’re being very annoying.”

“I’m trying not to be,” said Sirius and his voice wobbled. “I’m trying really fucking hard not to be. The Blacks like to give themselves airs but we’re putrid with dark magic and crazy to boot. There’s only me left. There isn’t anything…” Sirius made a helpless little grasping gesture with one hand.

Harry glared. “I threw Greengrass out the Three Broomsticks because he insulted you. I’m not going to stand here at listen to you do it to yourself.” He boosted himself up onto the counter.

Sirius stopped fidgeting long enough to actually look at him, “Harry, what are you – ”

“Come here.” Harry hauled Sirius in close and after an instant’s resistance Sirius was huddling into his arms.

“Now shut up and stop being a moron.”

“You sweet-talker you,” said Sirius and his laugh was shaky but real.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay, but I did have a lovely weekend

...
“And you could marry one of them.”

“Or I could not. I’m not saving a girl from a miserable marriage to someone else by inflicting a miserable marriage to me on her.”

Sirius laughed softly “Harry, you would never make anyone miserable. You’re far too nice. I should have realized. If people weren’t interested in you before, they will be now Greengrass has come round. You should consider carefully and get the best offer you can. James will help you.”

Harry spent an entertaining few seconds trying to imagine what James Potter would do to him if he went to him for help in marrying someone not-Sirius.

“And you wouldn’t?” he asked, while wondering if James would go to the bother of digging him a shallow grave in the Forbidden Forest or just leave him for the spiders.

“I’m no good at thinking like this, or politics in general. It’s too spikey, like eating broken glass.”

“So don’t. I’m not looking for second best. If things don’t work out…” he shrugged his shoulders. If things didn’t work out with Sirius he didn’t know what he was going to do, but whatever it was it wouldn’t be marrying Daphne Greengrass so he could become rich and important and miserable. If he’d wanted that he’d have stayed put. Anyway things were going to work. Sirius had as good as said he considered Harry suitable marriage material. He could work with that. And Harry had the disturbing feeling Sirius’ standards were higher for his girls than for himself.

“Oh, who are you interested in? Maybe I can give you some advice.”

Harry frowned, he clearly needed the courting book’s advice more than he thought, but honestly, who did Sirius think he was interested in.

“I thought I was being rather obvious,” he said, hurt that Sirius was so automatically discounting a connection between them he hadn’t even considered it.

“Not at all.” Sirius’ eyes narrowed in thought. “I hadn’t noticed you paying particular attention to anyone, except maybe – Neville?”

“No,” Harry yelped, horrified at the idea. “I’m not sure if I’m being stupid, or you’re being stupid.”

Sirius was still apparently lost in thought. Completely exasperated Harry snapped,

“James Potter. Who the hell do you think?”

“James!” Sirius’ eyes flew wide open. “Uh, that’s really not going to work out.”

Harry grasped after his evaporating patience to avoid grabbing the infuriating man and shaking some sense into him.

“No not James, you sodding moron. Or Neville. Or whichever horrifying choice you come up with next.”

“Snape,” offered Sirius, and the top of Harry’s head nearly blew off before it dawned on him Sirius was teasing.

“No, not Snape, you horrible person. He’s a rotten shag anyway. I’m talking about you.”

“Me?”
“Yes you.” Harry folded his arms. “I know I don’t measure up to much as these things go, and you’re you but I thought maybe…” he broke off unable to continue in the face of Sirius’ shocked horror. Misery coiled around him. He bit his lip and tried to force it down. It didn’t matter, he didn’t need to be married to Sirius, he just needed Sirius. And if it hurt to be rejected so thoroughly, that was on him, not Sirius.

Sirius was heaving for breath like he was running for his life, “You can’t want me,” he gasped. “You can’t waste yourself on me like that.”

The word waste snagged strongly enough to break through Harry’s anguish.

“Waste?” he repeated.

“Throw yourself away on, lower yourself to,” Sirius offered conversationally, as if Harry had wanted to clarify the meaning of the word.

Harry took a deep breath. This was important. Too important for hurt feelings to drive the conversation. All the same,

“You’re you,” he protested. “How could it possibly be a waste?”

Sirius pulled in on himself, white, stiff and formal, “If you’re thinking being Lord Black makes me worth anything, it doesn’t.”

His face scrunched up in disbelief, Harry said, “I’d like to believe that, because then it wouldn’t seem like I’m wishing for the impossible, but I don’t see how it can be true.”

“Okay, point,” Sirius laughed a little. “It makes me one of the Hogwarts lot, who are clearly superior to the common riff-raff.” His voice had gone high-pitched and he tossed his head and patted his hair in a weirdly feminine gesture.

Harry squinted at him.

“Cousin Cissy,” explained Sirius. “Who will remain convinced for the rest of her life that nobody else could ever be quite as superior as herself,” he smiled fondly. “Cissy would be the first to tell you that the Blacks are the noblest and ancientest wizarding house. She might even mention that we’re mad as any dozen boxes of frogs, because nothing says important like whipping someone unconscious in Diagon Alley without repercussions – my mother if you were wondering. But Cissy won’t say anything about wealth because we don’t have any, not to sacred twenty-eight standards. In fact she’ll tell you being wealthy is rather plebeian but she loved Lucius and was willing to suffer the trial of as many fancy dresses as she could grow accustomed to in order to marry him.”

“One must be willing to make sacrifices for love,” agreed Harry with his straightest face.

“Exactly,” Sirius placed one hand over his heart in honour of Narcissa’s sacrifice. “And Malfoy was willing to pay a stupendous amount to marry a Black so it was approved of all round. The Lestranges paid a not so small fortune for Trixie too.”

“Trixie,” said Harry, as it suddenly struck him this must be Bellatrix.

“She goes by Bella now. The Black magic got its hooks into her good and proper. She was half-crazy by the time she left Hogwarts. She wasn’t really a Black you see, my uncle was married off very young to an unfortunate young witch in the family way. Magic alone knows how much her family paid to get that little problem tidied up, I’ve never been able to bring myself to check.”
Harry slid his arm around Sirius waist and Sirius leaned against him, his head resting on Harry’s shoulder.

“So the family supervised Trixie very carefully. Pureblood training and everything. She’s in Azkaban now. Lost it completely after you-know-who vanished. Came after James. Tortured him. To find out what happened. I was linked into his wards. So I ambushed them. James was – I hate Bella.”

Harry rubbed his hand against Sirius’ arm and let his magic roll over him soft and sad.

“I banished her from the family after I claimed the lordship. Properly banished by ritual, not just disowned and blasted off the family tapestry. But Trixie was my cousin who let me eat her fancy chocolates as a bribe so she could practice her cosmetic charms on me, taught me how to lock my jaw so I didn’t bite through my tongue under Cruciatus, and told me endless drippy ballads where everyone died or got kidnapped by elves. I’ll always –” Sirius’ voice gave out and he sank into Harry like his body was too heavy for him to hold himself up.

Harry caught one of Sirius’ hands and nursed it against his cheek.

Sirius said quietly, “Nobody with any sense would consider a Black for a moment.”

“Good thing I famous for my complete lack of sense,” said Harry.

“Oh you need more horror stories.” Sirius straightened himself up, “I don’t even know what they did except it was horrendous, and probably money-related, but the last five remaining members of my immediate family managed to do something so monumentally stupid that the magic backlash killed them all in just over eighteen months. My aunt, my uncle, both grandfathers and a great-aunt.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry uselessly. Words were not his friends.

“It’s not your fault the Blacks are a freak show. The only ones left are me, I’m not even sure, first cousin a couple of times removed? anyway, Aunt Callidora. She’s so eaten up with vindictive bitterness and dark magic she’s grown right into her house. The trees curl in on the place like deformed fingers and the windows wink closed. The door opened as I walked up the path and the doorway smiled at me. Aunt Callidora came down the stairs, shrunken and dried out as if she was already dead. Her skirts meshed right into her carpets and she undulated towards me the way a rug ripples when you shake it out.”

He wrapped himself around Sirius as if he could make himself into a shield against the world.

“I didn’t actually step inside.”

“Thank Merlin,” muttered Harry.

“I was worried it would eat me. Dark magic can be very hungry. Aunt Callidora invited me in, her voice whispy as old paper, but when I backed away down the path the whole house roared. James made me swear never to go back. I made him swear to burn it down when she dies but I’m worried she’s not going to. So we warded the grounds to hell and back and I’m hoping for the best. Even the sturdiest house will fall down eventually, right?” Sirius peeked at him, white and hopeful.

Harry nodded. “Right.” And he resolved to speak to James and see if there was a way the house could very accidentally burn down sometime next week.

“So the only others left are the Cousins. Bella’s mad and in Azkaban and doesn’t even count as a
Black anymore. Andi never liked me.”

Andi must be Andromeda. “I’m sure that’s not true,” said Harry.

“I was an annoying child,” said Sirius. “I tell everyone she’s my favourite cousin and I’m sure she tells them all the same because we’re the two from our generation who were blasted off the tapestry, but that’s not actually a firm basis for liking anybody, and Andi didn’t like me, or anyone in the family, for years before she ran away.”

“Then she’s missing out.”

“If you say so. And finally there’s Cissy, who’s married to that wanker Malfoy and is convinced I have irreparably let the side down, much like when I used the wrong knife and fork at the Rosier’s banquet. Fish forks are complicated.”

Harry nodded in solemn agreement.

“They have a child each. Andi’s Nymphandora told everyone her mother’s family were dead, Andi’s idea I’m sure, and watched me like I might go mad and start cursing people in the middle of the Great Hall.” Sirius attempted a laugh, it wasn’t a very good effort.

“Oh and Cissy’s Draco.” Sirius’ grin grew more solid. “He’s never forgiven me for squelching his and Ronald Weasley’s attempts to restart their families’ feud. I told them they were third cousins once removed and therefore family and made them hug it out in front of everyone.”

“You are evil,” said Harry, awed at the idea. Ron and Draco must have been furious.

“I don’t think either of them will ever forgive me. Both mothers sent me howlers, at least Cissy sent hers to my quarters. But it did mean they hated me more than they hated each other so they at least stopped trying to hex each other for a bit. And James didn’t stop laughing for a week straight, so there’s that.”

Harry smiled, “See, James doesn’t think you’re not worth anything.”

“James is crazy.”

“And you’re still Lord Black, doesn’t that make you important?”

“Normally it would tempt a couple of families to send their daughters out to try and snag me with a pregnancy. But I’m both a Black and I’m me.” Sirius smiled weakly,

“Nobody wants to add dishonour to their family tree. Not dishonour everyone knows about and can’t be even partially covered up anyway. They’re just waiting for me to die. They’d probably already be trying to wrestle my voting rights away from me, except I’ve signed them all over to James. Dumbledore’s side are content for the moment, and you-know-who’s lot aren’t ready yet for a trial of strength.”

Harry was going to kill so many people.

“That’s everyone else being morons,” he said. “You are not dishonoured and I don’t see what any of the rest of it has to do with you. You are not your family.”

Sirius laughed and kissed him, “You are such a muggle. Of course you are your family. And my family have been circling the drain for the last fifty years. As for – well nobody speaks to me socially. If Dumbledore didn’t employ me at Hogwarts nobody would even acknowledge me. I
don’t give him any credit though because I turned him down the first two times he asked. Then he started muttering about Azkaban for *James* on the argument Liliana Rose and the baby’s deaths were the result of the recoil of dark magic he cast. So I had to say yes. James wouldn’t tell me how Dumbledore convinced him but he was window-rattlingly furious about it. Still, if I wasn’t at Hogwarts I’d be out in the muggle world just for somebody to talk to. Nobody is going to accept you being with me.”

“I don’t care what other people think,” Harry yelled, pushed past any attempt at reasonableness. He’d given up caring what people thought somewhere it what would have been his sixth year at Hogwarts. It made life so much less stressful.

Sirius groaned, “You should care. You don’t understand how hard it is not having a family standing behind you.”

“Sirius, I’ve never had a family standing behind me. And you know what I learned, I don’t need one. I’d like one though. Maybe just a few select people.” He tilted his head in question.

“You’re as crazy as James, and don’t think he hasn’t suffered for it.” Closing his eyes, Sirius slumped, “It’s a nice thought, alley cat. Let me know when you change your mind. No hard feelings, eh.”

“I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Uh huh.” Sirius nodded his head against Harry’s chest, not looking up and clearly not believing a word.

For the sake of his sanity Harry decided he’d call a halt for now and fight this battle another day. Regrouping was an entirely valid strategy.

“I thought I’d be the unacceptable one. No family at all, and no connections either.”

“You’ve not had seven years at Hogwarts to demonstrate your worth and start to build alliances. So you won’t have a chance at any of the acknowledged belles. Cousin Cissy was considered the most beautiful witch of her generation. I mean they weren’t counting Lily, obviously, but I still think Cissy would have edged it. Don’t tell Jay.”

Harry wasn’t sure if Sirius was being deliberately obtuse in an attempt to tell him no without saying the words, but he was aggravated past the point of being willing to put up with subtlety.

“You, I’m talking about you.”

“I told you I’m a bad match for you.”

“I’m talking about me for you.”

“Oh you’d be a *terrible* match for me.”

Harry felt rather as if Sirius had kicked him straight in the heart. And he just kept talking as Harry tried to gasp around the pain of it.

“You wouldn’t improve my situation at all. You’re male for a start. We couldn’t even get married, only bound. And same-sex bindings are considered shockingly irresponsible, particularly when the participants are under forty because there’s no possibility of children. And mentioning age, you’re far too young, I could probably get away with a much older wizard who’d keep me in line.”
Even distracted as he was, Harry didn’t like the sound of that, “You don’t need to be kept in line.”

“You and Jay are probably the only ones in the world to believe that. And the world thinks I’m scandalous now, I can’t even imagine the level of outrage that would generated if I showed up with you on my arm.”

It was depressing but Sirius was looking more cheerful and less defensive as he explained. Harry thought it would less painful to just cut his own heart out.

“The sort I really need to marry is a young woman with a lot of family connections, like Ginny Weasley. She’d be perfect. Her family is huge and already connected to Blacks, keeping things in the family and helping rehabilitate me in the eyes of our family connections. They haven’t any money, so they’re in no position to be too choosey, but there are six sons about to be making their way in the world who could make good use of the Black connections. She’s young and her family is known for having a lot of children, so she could provide me with a couple of heirs. Turn me into a reputable wizard. Or at least one who doesn’t go out the house much.”

Harry nearly collapsed where he stood, “You want to marry Ginny Weasley!”

“No! Of course not. Are you mad? She’s a baby. She’s younger than Davey. Ugh. I feel unclean thinking about it.”

Harry rubbed his forehead, his whole brain ached. “You spent five minutes detailing all the advantages of marrying her.”

“Well obviously there would be lots of advantages to marrying her. That’s politics. It’s all spiky and horrid but you got me thinking that way and it might be horrid but it’s still true. That doesn’t mean I’m going to marry her. It doesn’t mean I even want to. If I was going to let politics decide things I’d have married Iris Parkinson back when I was at Hogwarts.”

Suddenly Harry realized Sirius had been explaining with his example of Ginny, not deliberately stomping all over Harry’s heart in hobnailed boots. And Neville said Professor Potter was the frustrating one.

“Sirius,” he said patiently, “could we not discuss your theoretical marriage to people other than me because I don’t like it.”

“Uh sure. And don’t worry about Ginny, Molly would send her eldest two to murder me in my sleep. From what I can tell she’s holding out for Neville, which I think is over-reaching myself, but it might come off if the children like each other enough. Frank won’t approve, he’s hoping for Susan Bones but will settle for Christine Fawley. Amelia won’t want the match for Susan because their family will get rolled into the Longbottoms. But thankfully all the families want decent but happy marriages for their children so they’ll be watching as they grow up. Of course if you’ve had your family hammering in your ears about who is the most suitable partner for seven years, you’re likely enough to pick them anyway.”

“That seems unfair somehow.” Harry thought it all sounded unfair and depressing. He was beginning to truly understand Sirius’ aversion to politics.

“It’s the way it is. I would have married Iris for her sake because it’s a hard thing to be turned down once there’s an understanding between the families regardless of whether the children were consulted. But I told her first that I preferred male partners, because I wanted her to know what she was signing up for and she burst into tears and told me she was in love with Josiah Rowle but her father wouldn’t hear of it while there was a chance of me, even after I was disowned because
everybody expected that once I left Hogwarts and stopped consorting with blood traitors I would reowned. So, and this is a secret, don’t tell anyone.”

“I won’t.”

“So I couldn’t take my boyfriend, or any of the boys to Hogsmeade, because my father would have had them killed for besmirching me.”

“Is that even a word?”

“What, besmirch? Only if said in full nineteenth century sermon voice of doom. My father was excellent at that voice. My whole family belonged in the nineteenth century really.”

“Or a Russian novel.”

“Oh they would be outstanding in a Russian novel. Does anyone get killed for besmirching in a Russian novel?”

“I imagine several people did,” said Harry, who hadn’t actually ready any Russian novels just listened to Hermione go on about them. It had struck him at the time the plots were depressing enough for wizarding history.

“So in order not to get anybody killed, I nicked a couple of hairs from this blond blue eyed muggle who was quite pretty if you liked that sort of thing.”

“You don’t?”

“Right now I’m rather fond of dark hair and green eyes.” Sirius grinned at him and stole a kiss.

“And then James – this is the secret part not even Remus knows because James isn’t embarrassed, it’s just private – James polyjuiced himself into a blue-eyed blond – who completely coincidentally was smaller than me which was not at all deliberate no matter what James tells you – and we went to Hogwarts and made a total spectacle of ourselves. It was hilarious. James fed me cake. Well, shoved cake in my face, he was annoyed about the height thing, which was a total accident.”

“Sure, I believe you. Though you should probably tone down the smugness if you want anyone else to.”

“Shush you,” scolded Sirius, still grinning. “It made the papers, which we did not expect, but everyone went satisfyingly ballistic and Iris’ father nearly called mine out for trying to palm off a sodomite on his daughter. Of course my father wasn’t going to take that and nearly called him out for having a daughter who was unable to satisfy his son. Fortunately my grandfather stepped in and told them to stop embarrassing their families like that pathetic runt of a boy. So no duel, but the understanding was very firmly off and Iris got to marry Josiah, quickly too because her father didn’t want her chances ruined by a drawn out fuss in the papers. So Operation Scandal was a hundred percent success.”

“Your father didn’t, uh,”

“No. Once he figured out my blue-eyed blond didn’t go to Hogwarts and was such a nobody no one even knew who it was, he calmed right down. He did stop James’ dad when we walked by him in the street and told him he expected him to make it plain how unacceptable my behaviour was, and James’ dad said that he had a son himself and had a very clear idea of acceptable behaviour so there would be consequences. But I wasn’t really scared because James’ dad never hurt him. And I didn’t think it would bother him that much because I thought he didn’t know it was James. But
James, because James is a complete nutter, had told his parents everything. I was maybe a little bit scared then. But as it turned out James’ parents also thought it was hilarious and his dad said he was proud of me for helping Iris and not forgetting that other people were affected by my actions. And since he had promised there would be consequences he bought us ice creams. Really it’s not surprising James is a complete nutter when his mum and dad were both such utter fruit loops.”

Sirius’ wistful affection for James’ parents was painful to hear. Harry wanted to wrap Sirius up and hide him under his skin until the world stopped hurting him.

“I made you dinner,” he offered as if that was some sort of consolation.
Chapter 21

Sirius snapped out of his memories and focused on Harry looking at him all bright hope and affection. Sirius just didn’t understand how Harry could be so lovely, and why he was wasting it all on him.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to. Are you hungry? I’ll get it out the cooker and let it cool a little.” Harry opened the over door and pulled out the heavy roasting dish. “It’s ratatouille.”

“Oh.” Sirius gulped against the sudden queasy feeling in his stomach. “I didn’t know muggles ate rats.”

“Of course they don’t, why would you –,” and then Harry went off into a peal of laughter. He put the dish down and came over to bump gently against Sirius. “Idiot. It’s ratatouille, it’s French and has nothing to do with rats. It’s tomatoes, peppers, aubergine and courgettes.”

“Oh.” At least Sirius knew what rats were. He hadn’t even heard of two of those.

“Now we need bread,” Harry began to bustle around, “and, ah, I should check the front.” He stuck his head out the kitchen door. Sirius heard Rosmerta’s laugh,

“It’s about time you remembered,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, “Sirius was being both annoying and frustrating.”

“Hey,” said Sirius walking over to defend himself.

“Don’t worry about it Harry,” said Rosmerta, “I know what that one’s like. And Judith came to tell me all about Snape, which meant she missed your argument with Lord Greengrass, which Aileen came to tell me about. But she only told me very quickly, then she ran all the way back to be sure she didn’t miss anything. Judith is still sulking. And everyone else is making up stories about what exactly you and Sirius are getting up to in my poor kitchen.”

Harry flushed. “Not in a kitchen, it’s unhygienic.”

_Oooh_, thought Sirius, _challenge accepted._

“Pleased to hear it. Harry this is Bethan. She helps out sometimes.”

“Nice to meet you Harry,” said Bethan. She was a plump girl with thick chestnut curls and large gentle brown eyes. “My mam kept me home these last few days, she didn’t want me associating with that unknown Rosmerta had given house room. Course then she figured out how much gossip she was missing out on, so here I am.”

“Sorry,” Harry offered as if he wasn’t sure what the appropriate response might be.

“Don’t worry about it. My mam gets funny sometimes. My dad was killed last time, trying to stop them snatching my big sister Meggie, little sister now I guess. She was only seven. They tell me there’s lots of rituals that need seven year olds, ’s magic number isn’t it.”
The familiar overpowering sense of failure rolled over Sirius like a great crushing wave.

Bethan huffed, “They’d have been Hogwarts students wouldn’t they. They were the ones around the village enough to know where the seven year old who’d just found her magic lived. Maybe even that Professor Snape up at the castle thinking he’s so fine, coming down here to sneer at us.”

“He’s working for Dumbledore this time,” said Harry, which Sirius could have told him was a mistake.

Bethan slowly blinked her large bovine eyes at him, “Well thank ‘ee kindly for telling me, sir. I feel right better about it now.”

Harry flinched at the verbal smack. But he didn’t cringe or turn away, he straightened his shoulders, “It’s not much consolation, I know, but I’m going to a meeting he’s at tonight with the intention of being spectacularly rude to him.”

“Actually that does make me feel better.” Bethan smiled and the viciousness of it looked wrong on features designed to placid and kind. “Can you give him a slap in the face for me? I’ve wanted to every time I see him walking around like his hands aren’t dirty with our blood. It would be worth whatever he did to me. But my mam would be sick with fear for weeks.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“And let me see it in one of those fancy memory sieves?” she asked eagerly.

“Uh, I don’t have a pensieve.”

“I do,” said Sirius.

“Please,” begged Bethan. “And you throwing him out the Three Broomsticks. Can my mam watch too?”

“Okay,” said Harry, “but I want the memory back afterwards.”

“Of course,” agreed Sirius, alarmed that Harry felt the need to specify, and trying not to get any more curious about how much Harry was aware of the wizarding world.

“Thank you,” Bethan flung her arms around Harry and kissed him on the cheek. Sirius could see Harry’s back go stiff with the strain of it but he managed not to shove her away.

She went to tend the bar and Sirius drew Harry and Rosmerta into the kitchen and out of view.

“Sorry about Bethan,” said Rosmerta. “Her mother probably should have moved away from Hogsmeade, it’s too close to the castle. But she was pregnant with Bethan at the time and couldn’t work much so she had to stay with her neighbours. Their shop was all but destroyed too.”

“It likely was Snape along with Mulciber and Avery,” Sirius admitted, and it was still painful to say it of boys he grew up with even if he’d never liked them. “It was the summer after we left Hogwarts and was the sort of soft mission you-know-who would have broken them in with.”

“So they mission?” said Harry.

Sirius shifted unhappily, because the truth was sometimes so ugly it stained you to speak it.

Harry shook his head and turned to Rosmerta, “I was going to apologize for throwing Snape out, but I’m not sure I can manage that right now.”
“Don’t trouble yourself,” she said. “He waited until he I was gone because I won’t have him in the place. He can shop in Hogsmeade if he likes, and it’s no reflection on them that they can’t turn away a Hogwarts Professor, but I can make sure he doesn’t get to clutter up my place. And I don’t want the trouble. He’d collect that slap and more if shoved himself under people’s notice like that.”

Harry bobbed his head, “And I probably shouldn’t have thrown Lord Greengrass out. That’s bound to cause you problems.”

“Well I wouldn’t advise chucking lords around willy-nilly,” Rosmerta chuckled, “I can’t believe I had to say that and I’ve known that one over there these past twenty years or more. But this time I believe my favourite customer can keep us out of trouble.” She glanced again at Sirius and he nodded,

“Yes. Greengrass is unlikely to start anything, Harry should be so far beneath his notice, he knows it will only make him look foolish. But if you do have any trouble let me know. I’m not exactly recognized but I still have a few friends left.” Or rather he had James, which was better than any number of political connections.

“Thank you. Now more pleasant matters, Harry I believe you were cooking something special?”

“Yes. Would you like to try some, there’s plenty.”

“Yes come on Rosie, there’s, what was it again?”

“Tomatoes, peppers, aubergine and courgettes, with garlic and onions. And crusty bread from the shop.” Harry bounced away to serve up the dish and Sirius was pleased to see Rosmerta look visibly boggled. She mouthed, *What*? at him and he helplessly shrugged his shoulders back at her.

Harry beamed and kissed him as he handed him a dish of mushed vegetables. Sirius was not fond of vegetables in general, unless they were potatoes. Sadly this dish did not seem to contain potatoes. He poked at the veggies experimentally. They squiggled. Across from him Rosmerta looked at her own dish, clearly as suspicious as he felt.

With a deft circle of his wand and three quick jabs Harry created stools for each of them so they could perch at the kitchen counter. He was still beaming away like this was a brilliant treat. He had his own bowl of vegetables but hadn’t started eating yet as he was busy watching Sirius and Rosmerta with anticipation.

“I should go help Bethan out the front,” said Rosmerta, “I’ll eat this later.”

“Oh but try a little now while I’m here,” coaxed Harry, so light and happy that Sirius wanted to hug him.

He reminded himself he’d eaten decidedly burnt a time or two, he could manage this. And Harry appeared to know what he was doing so it wouldn’t be like that time Lily mixed up the measurements when she attempted her dad’s favourite chicken curry and he and James had used numbing charms on their mouths so they could swallow down what they thought was weird muggle food, until Lily tried some herself and immediately spat it out, coughing and cursing like a drunk Auror. So they had chocolate cake for main, got blitzed on bad whiskey for dessert and Sirius woke up in the fireplace because the floo system apparently spat him back out again.

He jabbed the tines of his fork through the veggies until he found a soggy tomato, which was at least recognizable. The trick was to chew fast and then swallow as quickly as possible. So he did, barely stopping to taste, except, um, that was like a tomato but better, warming and fragrant, and
umm. He forked up another bit of something, it looked rather green and mushy but was just as
delicious.

“Wow, this is great. Rosie you have to try some.”

Rosmerta looked entirely doubtful. To be fair Sirius would have said exactly that no matter what it
tasted like, but, “No, Rosie, really. Try a bit. It’s amazing.”

Rosmerta did, and Sirius hoped he hadn’t looked as startled as she did.

“This is wonderful Harry.” She took another bite. “Quite wonderful. You’ll need to give me the
recipe.”

“If you want,” agreed Harry, proud and pleased.

“I’d ask for the recipe too,” he said. “But nobody I know is any good at cooking anything but cake
so it probably wouldn’t work.”

“Cakes are the fussy ones. This is practically foolproof.”

“Yeah everybody says that, then you need medical potions because somebody mixed up
tablespoons and teaspoons.”

“Oh dear,” Harry sniggered. “That’s an easy mistake though if you haven’t cooked before. This is
easy, honest. It’s mostly chopping, it barely counts as cooking.”

“Maybe you could show me later?” It would be nice if he could cook something for once.

“Of course.”

Harry was so pleased he wrapped his arms around himself in a congratulatory hug, which was both
sweet and heart-breaking. So Sirius leaned over and wrapped his arm around Harry’s back, waiting
for his alley cat to tense at the contact then relax into the touch, before pulling him close.

“It is very lovely and you are very lovely. Thank you Harry.”

Then he focused on his dinner. Breaking off a chunk of the bread and dipped it in the juices, it was
so delicious he felt hungrier as he ate.

After a pause for eating, Harry said, “So do you have any money, Sirius? You weren’t completely
clear.”

Sirius’ head jerked towards him, he wasn’t sure he like this conversation. He definitely wasn’t as
hungry as he thought he was. He pushed his bowl back and turned to give Harry his full attention.
He could feel caution creeping over him and he hated it.

He couldn’t help it though, there had been enough people who’d bluntly made him aware that he
could spend the Black fortune, such as it was, buying their friendship. On the other hand he had
also been friends with Remus for years and knew the frustration of having a friend who would
rather starve to death than take your money.

(It was about ten years ago that he and James had finally managed to tag-team Dumbledore into
agreeing that as a member of the Order Remus needed to look the part as it was hardly going to
persuade any werewolves that it was in their interests to support the Order if their representative
looked like a half-starved scarecrow. So Remus received a stipend for his intelligence gathering
activities quietly funded entirely by James. Sirius had offered to help but James had looked at him,

“Pads, we we’re just this second talking about impossible friends who are too proud to accept their financial circumstances.” Sirius hadn’t been about to admit anything out loud but he gave way with bad grace and a mute nod.

James had seized on the opportunity to add, “And if you ever need help with marriage settlements.” So Sirius had given up on quiet acceptance.

“Jay, I’m not taking your money. Even if I was going to get married, which I’m not.”

James shrugged, “Bound then. And people change, so if you ever need assistance. Or with anything else.”

Sirius had told him to shut the hell up, nobody he’d actually want to be bound to would accept the heir of the house of Black. James had gone quiet but Sirius wasn’t foolish enough to think that meant James agreed with him.)

Now Sirius had found someone he would bind himself to, and Harry was crazy enough to accept him. Which was as frustrating as hell because it meant Sirius was having to be noble and think about the other person and all that other shit that he was really, really bad at.

Merlin, it hadn’t even occurred to him that Harry would be sought after for his lack of connections. Sirius tried not to slip into that mind-set that weighed and measured people’s value like a merchant with scales and a set of callipers. It made him feel dirty. He hated politics.

James somehow managed to hold both points of view in his head at the same time. Some people were beyond price, treasured and precious; while others were to be coolly assessed for the advantages they offered. Sirius’ brain, however, was all or nothing. While he could turn on that barbed and frozen political mind-set it left him unable to recognize people as intrinsically valuable for their own sake. Once he had even caught himself evaluating James for his potential usefulness and had been utterly disgusted with himself. He’d run to James to confess immediately but James, once he had made sense of Sirius’ frantic babbling, had been annoyingly unbothered because James was crazy. He’d finally shoved Sirius down into Padfoot, kicked him under the desk and let him curl up there until he felt better. Sirius loved his best friend so very much.

Once Greengrass had pointed it out to him, Sirius couldn’t help but see Harry’s strategic value. As a powerful, unattached wizard, Harry was wildcard in the system. If he picked carefully he could be one of the leaders of British Wizardry in a couple of decades. Sirius should be ashamed of himself for dragging Harry into his clutches (not that he had dragged Harry exactly, and Harry did seem perfectly happy where he was, but those were excuses, weak feeble excuses). Sirius was ashamed of himself.

But he had told Harry, and if Harry wanted to stay with him a little longer, well Sirius didn’t have any more nobility in him. And if Harry wanted something expensive, Sirius could probably make himself ask James for the money – if Sirius hated himself for it, it was no more than he deserved.

“I have money but not Sacred Twenty-Eight money,” he said. “More than enough for a comfortable living, but nowhere near enough to live in London and do the season. A lesser family could but Blacks have a position to keep up. Living quietly at Hogwarts I barely spend anything. The London crowd are all about spending money. The latest fairie silk in this year’s colours, the most extravagant, elaborate jewels, the very best of everything. To be honest I’d have a hard time even understanding what I’d be supposed to spend my money on. It was okay when I had Cousin Cissy to keep me up to date but now it passes me by.” Sirius racked his brain for an example,
“Like five years ago, it was redoing your dining room into a Roman triclinium, I remember because, as it turns out, it’s hard to eat elegantly while reclining on a couch and someone got pictures of the Selwyn Midsummer banquet and it caused a minor scandal when the Daily Prophet published them. Terribly bad form, don’t you know, and generally considered to down to bribery by the Yaxleys who were competing against them for control of the Chair of the Department of Mysteries at the time. Anyway everybody then had to redo their dining rooms in a hurry. I think Atlantean was the next theme but I could be wrong.

“Oh and last year the colour was yellow, I remember Cissy complaining because it doesn’t suit her, I think she nearly declared a feud with Miranda Nott because she blamed her for championing the colour to spite her. But other than that I have no idea.”

“That sounds mind-numbingly annoying,” said Harry.

“I agree, but it’s important to keep up to demonstrate your worthiness of inclusion in the social round and thus the political round. You should hear Cissy talk about cheap witches who try to refurbish last year’s clothes. And she enjoys it all so much it was almost interesting when she explained it. Malfoy in no way appreciates her enough.” Sirius scowled, then turned back to Harry.

“So yes, I have money, just not enough to act important about it. Why?”

His breath got caught as he waited for an answer. He hoped Harry would starting talking around to his need for clothes, which was both stark and obvious. Sirius itched to buy Harry clothes, fluffy warm sweaters and skin-tight jeans.

He really didn’t want Harry to ask for a house. It was perfectly reasonable for somebody to want that sort of security, but Sirius would still rather Harry didn’t.

(Alec had wanted a house. Sirius hadn’t wanted to buy him one even though he couldn’t really explain why. It was ungrateful he knew to ignore Alec’s hints, and grumbles, and straight up complaints that it was holding him back at work being unable to invite people to dinner in the cramped rooms he shared with Sirius. It was holding him back at work being with Sirius. Sirius could at least buy him a house to make up for it. As Alec pointed out it would be his house so it didn’t matter that Sirius hadn’t wanted a house since the one he bought with Uncle Alphard’s money burned down. Was burned down, dark-marked and everything, and they woke up after a party to flames and long terrifying minutes until they could be sure everyone was out and safe. In retrospect that was probably Pete’s first mission. Soft target.

But Alec had wanted and Sirius couldn’t explain why he was refusing to himself let alone Alec and he’d eventually retreated from the not quite arguments to James. James, who was generally ridiculously laidback about spending money, had agreed with him, which Sirius hadn’t expected. James had suggested he stay over a few days, give Alec some time to think. When he went back Alec’s stuff was cleared out and there was only a short cold note – he didn’t feel he and Sirius weren’t suited to each other after all. Sirius’d bumped into him a couple of times afterwards and Alec was so stiffly correct Sirius would have thought he was under Imperius, if he hadn’t quietly cast the counter to check.

Sirius had felt guiltily relieved, even though his logical side told him Alec was his last chance at finding someone willing to put up with him. He’d never even have met Alec if he hadn’t been dealing with the Black Estate after sudden deaths of his last remaining family and got frustrated with all the fusty purebloods, so they’d dredged Alec up out of the sub-basement, or wherever they hid the muggle-born clerks, and had Alec deal with him. Alec had asked him out and Sirius still had no idea what the man had been thinking, or what he’d been thinking when he’d said yes.)
He swallowed down the sick feeling rising in his throat. He could buy a house for Harry if he had to. Harry deserved a house.

Harry smiled at him, “So you could loan Rosmerta money?”

Sirius was so sideswiped at the change from what he’d expected that it took him a moment to reset his thoughts. He turned to Rosmerta who had a stiff outraged expression that reminded him uneasily of Remus denying he was hungry while his stomach growled.

“Rosie, you need money?” He’d thought she was doing okay. Her custom had picked up again once he’d laid those wards down and she’d stopped looking so drawn and anxious. She’d wanted to pay him for them. Which, Sirius had laid down Black family wards – not all of his family magic was dark but it was all vicious – those wards were literally priceless, though Sirius reckoned his Uncle Pollux would have had a go at charging for them regardless. In the end Sirius had asked for dinner when he could get away from Hogwarts. He’d never planned on taking her up on it, but Rosie had smiled, kissed his cheek and said she’d be delighted to see more of him. And she nagged him if he didn’t show up for dinner at least once a week.

“I do not need money,” she said rigidly. The glare she was inflicting on Harry would have shrivelled a lesser man. Harry didn’t seem to notice,

“Of course you don’t need money,” he said. “You need money you can spend.”

That made no sense. “Uh, you might need to run that past me again, alley cat.”

“It is none of your concern,” said Rosmerta. “Harry, a word.”

“Just a moment,” said Harry, he turned to Sirius, “Madam Rosmerta has plenty of money, but she needs to save it in case the death eaters burn the Three Broomsticks down. But you can loan her the money, then when the Three Broomsticks doesn’t burn down, she can pay you back.”

“And if the Three Broomsticks does burn down?” demanded Rosmerta, although she looked less wrathful and more considering.

“Sirius will forgive the loan,” said Harry.

“Like a bet,” said Sirius, interested now and kicking himself for not realizing such an obvious issue. “I bet it doesn’t burn down, if it doesn’t you give me the money back, if it does you keep the money.”

“I could never enter into such an irregular arrangement, Lord Black,” said Rosmerta.

Sirius drew back, knowing he needed to step carefully but also recognizing that Rosmerta was not opposed to an arrangement in general.

“What sort of arrangement did you have in mind Madam Rosmerta?”

“A business like one. The wards were one thing, a favour between friends. But this is business and will be treated as such.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

Rosmerta shook her head, “You are the most frustrating person I’ve ever had to deal with, and I deal with drunken idiots every Saturday night.”
“Me?” What was Sirius being frustrating about, he was happy to do this any way Rosmerta wanted.

“You are,” agreed Harry sourly.

“And you keep quiet,” said Rosmerta sharply. “I didn’t tell you about the money so you could tell the world.”

“I would never tell anyone,” Harry drew himself up, all offended dignity. Rosmerta gazed pointedly at Sirius. Harry looked between the two of them, puzzled, “What? But that’s Sirius. Sirius isn’t an anyone.”

Rosmerta stared at him for a long moment. “My mistake,” she said finally. “And I was wrong you’re at least as frustrating as Sirius.”

“I am not –”

“Now be quiet, Lord Black and I are talking business.”

“Fine,” Harry hunched in sulkily and took a large bite of his food.

“Sorry,” said Sirius as a pre-emptive measure because he didn’t like it when people were upset.

“It’s not a problem,” said Rosmerta. “Now since we have been dragged into this conversation, my suggestion would be that you buy into the Three Broomsticks. I will pay you a portion of the profits with an option to buy you out at any time if I chose. You will receive a share of the profits, but will also share the loss if something happens to the building.”

“Sounds fine to me,” said Sirius. “Did you need me to sign some paperwork, or did you just want the money?”

“You will need to speak to your lawyer. I am not having it said I took advantage of you.”

“If that’s what you want. But surely I would be the one taking advantage of you.”

“You keep believing that,” she said tartly but she was smiling.

Sirius wasn’t sure but it seemed like the being cross portion of the evening was over. He tilted his head, “We good?” he asked tentatively.

“Yes we’re good. I will admit there is charm work that needs doing and this will help. But it will be done properly and above board.”

“Absolutely,” Sirius agreed. He didn’t want to place her under an obligation or make her uncomfortable. He kicked Harry’s stool, “Apologise to Rosmerta for spilling her secrets.”

“I didn’t,” Harry started, and then stopped when Sirius glared at him. He swivelled on his stool to look at Rosmerta, “I’m sorry I upset you.”

“But not sorry you told Sirius are you? No don’t apologise, it was my own fault.”

“I am sorry,” said Harry more urgently.

“I know you are. Don’t worry about it. I agree with you. Sirius isn’t an anyone.”

“Exactly,” Harry nodded smugly. “And now we can fix the sink.”
Sirius laughed, “You got just wanted didn’t you, you mercenary little goblin.”

Harry grinned.

Rosmerta shook her head at the two of them as Sirius dragged Harry over to place a string of quick kisses across the back of his neck as Harry giggled and squirmed. She’d been more annoyed at herself than Harry, it had just taken her a while to recognize that.

She had mentioned the money issue to Harry in the hopes he’d pass it on to Sirius to come up with some solution, probably very similar to his original bet idea. However having Harry ask so baldly, especially after Sirius had just explained how rich he wasn’t, had made it very obvious how greedy she was being. She didn’t like thinking of herself like that and it made her cross.

This though was an honourable solution. She’d be able to pay him back and they’d share the risks of the Three Broomsticks burning down. They could fix both the cooker and the sink Harry was so worried about. And she felt better about herself, Sirius made it too easy to take advantage of him.

She’d give Harry a hug of thanks but Sirius was doing it for her. Instead she ate some more the strange muggle dish Harry had made. It really was very good. Perhaps they could expand the menu at the Three Broomsticks to go with the refurbishment.

Harry was thoroughly pleased with himself. Sirius had liked his cooking a lot which was – Harry didn’t think he’d ever been quite so pleased before. He wasn’t good at all that much except cooking and killing people. Before he’d only ever been able to impress by killing people, which he always found rather lowering although he couldn’t explain why. Killing people was more dramatic after all.

But Sirius had liked his cooking. And ratatouille wasn’t even that special. Just wait until he figured out a way to afford some of the more expensive ingredients and could really start showing-off. (It was okay to want to show-off for Sirius, wasn’t it? Harry wanted to impress him so badly he probably would kill people if Sirius wanted him to.)

And Sirius and Rosmerta had done a deal to get the sink fixed which was great because it was really unhappy about its clogged drain. Harry wasn’t sure why Rosmerta was so worried the place burning down, Sirius had been very careful when it came to fire, his wards could take on Fiendfyre if they had to. Deep in the floor beneath him the wards grumbled in agreement.

Harry scuffed his foot against the kitchen tiles to soothe them and felt them settle back into waiting.

Sirius decided Harry had been so blunt about the money he could probably risk asking,

“Are you going to let me give you some clothes? You need to give those a break from scourgifying or you’ll wear them out.”

Harry’s eyes went hot and covetous, “You’ll let me have some of your clothes?”

“Oh,” Sirius stumbled because he’d been thinking along the lines of a shopping trip.
The eager light in Harry’s face went out abruptly. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“No,” said Sirius, “I mean yes. You can have some of my clothes.” He pictured Harry in his soft green sweater and a pair of worn jeans. “You can definitely have some of my clothes,”

“Just a couple of pairs of jeans and some t-shirts,” Harry specified, “And maybe a sweater.”

“And a winter coat,” added Rosmerta practically. “It gets cold up here come October.”

“I buy my muggle stuff large, because it’s easier to shrink than expand, so resizing shouldn’t be a problem. You’ll need a robe too. Just in case. Socks and pants?”

“I’m paying Harry tomorrow,” said Rosmerta, “I think he can manage his own socks and pants.”

“Alright then. Sorted.” He paused and looked at Harry’s face. It did not appear as if things were sorted. “Harry?”

“Gloves?” whispered Harry as if this was more than he dare ask for.

“Of course gloves,” said Sirius, annoyed with himself for missing something so obvious. They were more essential than a coat because even with a warming charm you could lose a finger to frostbite if you weren’t very careful. “And a scarf. I’ll buy you a set tomorrow.”

Harry ducked, his head bobbling.

“Harry? Sorry, I talked over you. What did you want?”

Harry looked up at him with big, green, longing eyes.

“Harry love?”

“Your gloves?” he whispered.

“My gloves?” Sirius reached into the pocket of his jacket. It wasn’t cold enough for real gloves but he had an old pair of fingerless Quidditch gloves stashed there because they were handy in a fight. He had no idea why Harry might want his gloves. Maybe a whole wardrobe was too much but even Remus had let them buy him gloves and scarves as presents. Still the way Harry’s eyes fixed eagerly on his jacket pockets told him it was important, and really he’d probably give Harry his hands if he wanted them, gloves were nothing.

“Here,” he said, holding out the scrunched up gloves.

Harry pouted, “You have to put them on first. You know it doesn’t count otherwise.”

More certain than ever that this was more significant than he understood, Sirius carefully pulled the gloves on, flexing his grip to feel the leather creak. He’d had them for a long time, they’d been in a lot of fights together. They were only gloves but he was going to miss them.

“You don’t have to,” said Harry quietly.

“No, no I want you to have them. They’ve looked after me for a long time, and now they’ll look after you.” He liked that idea. Carefully pulled one off, then the other, and handed them to Harry.

Harry’s smile was luminous. He ran careful fingers over the leather and then slowly pulled them on, right hand, then left. He spread his fingers wide to admire the gloves. Then turned his hand palm up and held his wrists out to Sirius in silent request. Caught in the quiet of the gesture, Sirius
carefully tightened the straps around each sturdy wrist, then pressed a kiss to each palm.

Hands clenched into tight fists, Harry curled them in close against his chest. Sirius reached out and gently stroked his finger along Harry’s jaw, encouraging him to look up at him. Harry shook his head and threw himself at Sirius, flinging his arms around him in a crunching tackle, forehead slamming into his chest. Sirius kissed the tips of ears, the only bit of him he could reach as Harry hung on like he was drowning.

“You okay?” he whispered.

Harry nodded against his chest. He finally pulled back, swiped violently at his eyes and sat up. Sirius’ eyes dropped to Harry’s hands in his old battered gloves and maybe there was something to this because he’d swear his heart jolted in his chest.

Suddenly Harry bounced to his feet, spinning around to wave his hands under Rosmerta’s nose.

“Look, Sirius gave me his gloves.”

“I saw,” said Rosmerta. Her face was very straight and Sirius reckoned she was laughing at them.

“His gloves,” Harry insisted, obviously unsatisfied with her response.

“And very nice they are too.”

“Nice,” scoffed Harry, “they’re amazing. I’m going to go show Bethan.” He darted out the kitchen, and Sirius could him calling, “Bethan, hey Bethan, look, Sirius gave me his gloves.”

Sirius discovered he was smiling and didn’t seem to be able to stop, “Is this some muggle thing they don’t tell us poor purebloods? I’ll have to have words. Do you think I should be worried I’ve accidentally gotten engaged?”

“No,” said Rosmerta, she was definitely laughing at him, “I think you should be worried that you seem delighted you might have accidentally gotten engaged.”

Yeah, that didn’t sound good. Sirius would worry about that – just as soon as he could stop smiling.
Harry shoved his gloved hands at Behan, unconvinced she was impressed enough.

“They’re very nice gloves,” she said.

He squinted at her, trying to work out if she was being sarcastic or serious, “They’re Sirius’ gloves,” he reminded.

“Oh huh.”

Harry looked down at his hands, turning his wrist so he could admire the gloves from all angles.

“Oh Harry,” said Bethan. “Is this your book on courting?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s an old book. Sirius is from an old family. I want to get it right.”

“No this is a really old book. Older than anything anyone does now.”

Harry nodded because he didn’t want to argue with Bethan but he didn’t think she understood. The old families did things their own way. He knew from before that the Slytherins had their own ways of doing things even if he didn’t know what they were. And while Sirius hated most of his family’s traditions, some things still stuck. Like Uncle Vernon used to bring Aunt Petunia petunias sometimes. Harry always thought that was so nice, and had been sorry he didn’t have a flower name so that someday someone could bring him flowers to match his name. Of course Dudley didn’t have a flower name either but he thought the whole thing was gross. He’d still mocked Harry about it anyway.

Harry was going to stick to his book. Hadn’t Sirius just given him his gloves like the book said, that proved it was working.

“Oh alright, I guess you know your own business best,” said Bethan slowly. “And if he thinks enough of you to just hand over his gloves, who am I to argue. It’s not like Lord Black doesn’t need someone willing to take up for him.”

Harry curled his right hand into a fist and ran the tips of his fingers over the glove. The leather wrapped protectively over his knuckles right up to his first finger joint, and it was scuffed and scarred where Sirius had punched something. Fighting gloves. Harry was more than willing to fight for Sirius.

“Yeah,” he smiled.

“Ha,” said Bethan. “All those fancy Professors have no idea what’s coming.”

Harry was definitely going to enjoy punching people for Sirius, but later. For now he waggled his
gloved hands for Bethan’s inspection one last time, before dashing away to find someone else to admire them.

Sirius finished his dinner, because it tasted great and Harry had made it for him.

“It’s called ratatouille,” he told Rosmerta.

“Seriously?”

Sirius opened his mouth.

“No,” Rosmerta pointed one sharp finger at him. “Do not even think of making that joke. I have heard that pun more than any one person should in a lifetime. It was just about bearable when you and James Potter were scrawny thirteen year olds with breaking voices who thought you were the coolest things out of Hogwarts but I’m not going to put up with now.”

“Rosie!”

“What? Aren’t embarrassing stories the traditional response to an engagement?”

“Ah,” Sirius fumbled with his knife and fork, embarrassed and happy and feeling stupid for it. “Not actually engaged,” he reminded.

“Give Harry a chance. I hope you’re thinking of an appropriate ring because that boy is going to steal you one from a dragon or something equally ludicrous.”

That was alarmingly likely to be true. Sirius hid his face in his hands, “I don’t understand him at all.”

“Is it really so difficult to believe somebody finally appreciates you?”

Sirius stayed quiet.

“Then look at this way, you’re probably the only person who could actually cope with Harry, he’d knock the average person flat.”

Sirius laughed, “You think he hasn’t knocked me flat.”

“You’re still coherent.”

“Yeah, that’s probably the best that can be hoped for.” Sirius clutched himself tightly. “What am I going to do?”

“Well my recommendation would be to let Harry appreciate you. And maybe suggest that stealing from dragons can have unforeseen consequences.”

“Good idea. Stealing from dragons is a terrible plan.” He’d like to think Harry would have the sense to know that but muggle-borns could be horribly lacking in magical culture. And it if he’d been getting his information via you-know-who and his followers they’d probably left out all the warnings because they were sort who were too stupid to believe in them. The sort who thought you could steal from magic without it being reclaimed. A gift demands a gift. The reckoning will always come due.

“Why did I think you’d focus on that part? No, I’m shutting up now. Just tell me, is that dish truly
called ratatouille?”

“Honest. It’s French apparently.”

“Well we’re changing that or we’ll never sell it.”

“Yeah, what will you call it then?”

“I don’t know. Maybe ‘Serious Vegetables’”

It took him a second to get it, then, “Rosmerta!”

“What? I never said I couldn’t make that dreadful pun. Now go find Harry before he tells the whole bar about his new gloves.”

Sirius fled before she could come up with any more stories. He and James had not been smooth as they discovered alcohol.

He found Harry earnestly showing off his gloves to the hard cases at the end of the bar.

“They’re not very smart gloves,” said Murphy doubtfully. He eyed Sirius suspiciously like Sirius should have done better. You could get some very fancy embroidered gloves, maybe Sirius should have done better.

“Of course not,” said Harry stoutly. “They’re not supposed to be. They’re Sirius’ gloves, for fighting.”

“Oh well if they’re for fighting.” Murphy looked down at Harry, he was easily a half a foot taller. Harry looked up at him. Sirius couldn’t see the expression on Harry’s face but it made Murphy duck his head, “You’re a vicious little thing aren’t you.”

“People keep being mean to Sirius.”

“Harry,” Sirius, looping his arm around his waist to draw him back. “I can look after myself, you know.”

The lads all looked unconvinced.

“That Professor Snape comes around late sometimes. He says dreadful things, can hardly stand to listen to them.”

Sirius winced because he hadn’t known anybody had overheard. “Alley cat,” he started to appeal.

Harry cut him off, “Sirius, do you think Bethan would be upset if instead of slapping Snape in the face I broke his nose instead. Maybe his jaw too.”

“Bethan’d likely give you a medal,” said Murphy unhelpfully.

“Harry you can’t fight with Snape about the shit he says. I don’t even listen to him.” Mostly. Sirius just had to keep focussed on the long term and forget how much he wanted to smack Snape in the face with his fist in the short term. He could do it.

Harry looked at him for a moment. “Does James know about this?”

“No,” said Sirius with a laugh because James would –
“That’s what I thought,” said Harry.

– oh hell, Sirius was an idiot.

Harry almost smiled at him, “I’ll do you a deal, I’ll let it go – if you tell James.”

“Really rather not.” Because James would be able to make a much better guess than Harry at exactly what Snape had been saying and it would all go very badly.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Really, don’t worry about it. We should be going.”

“I just want to show my gloves to Thacker.”

“Oh for goodness – yes, if it makes you happy.”

Harry bounced away. Murphy tapped Sirius on the shoulder,

“Lord Black, could we have a word.” The rest of the lads shuffled forward to edge him in against the bar.

Sirius braced himself. The forceful recounting of his sins was never pleasant but he’d lived through it before and he would again. He only wanted Harry not hear because, well he’d rather he didn’t.

“Yes?” he said as pleasantly as he could manage.

“Harry thinks a lot of you.”

That wasn’t how these things usually started, “Yes,” he agreed tentatively.

“A lot. And we would be very unhappy if you were taking advantage of that.”

Sirius blinked because that sounded as if they were, “Are you honestly coming after me in defence of Harry’s virtue?”

“No, we’re saying we don’t care about your swanky lordship, if you break his heart, we’ll break you.”

“I’m not going to break Harry’s heart.” It was going to be the other way round.

Murphy folded his arms. They did not look convinced.

“For Merlin’s sake, I gave him my gloves didn’t I?” Even if Sirius wasn’t sure what it meant, it clearly meant something.

He received a round of grudging nods.

“So there.”

“Well see that it stays that way.”

Sirius had no idea what to say, so he nodded, edged through the crowd of them and went to find Harry. Things made more sense with Harry.
Harry let Sirius hustle them out the pub. Sirius was collecting doubtful looks again which was annoying because Harry had only just finished telling everyone how brilliant Sirius was. He was going to have to put more effort into it. Now though he had a meeting to get to and people to insult.

They were about halfway to the castle when Sirius tugged gently on his arm to draw them to a halt.

“Sirius?”

“I think you said it by accident. In fact I’m pretty sure you didn’t even notice you’d said it.”

“Sirius?” Panic started to stir. Sirius smiled at him sadly,

“You called Snape a rotten shag. Casually. Not as an insult, just as a fact that was indisputably true. That you knew to be true.”

“S-,” Harry’s teeth were chattering too loudly.

“Ssh, come here,” Sirius pulled at his arm, pulling him down and Harry went with the motion collapsing down onto Sirius’ lap like all his strings had been cut.

“Sirius I’m sorry. So sorry.” In his head he heard Snape’s sly voice, *what would Black think of his little Gryffindor now*, his teeth chattered louder.

“What the hell have you got to be sorry for? Shit sorry, didn’t mean to shout. Come here, sit up a little. Shit, I am going to murder Snape.”

“Not his fault.” Harry managed to force out. “I agreed.”

“Sure you did. That’s why you’re shivering like a dementor’s walking past. Come here.”

Harry shook his head, trying to pull away. “I’ll get you all cold.”

“Two people are never as cold as being on your own.”

“I don’t want you to be cold at all.”

“Well it’s too late for that. Will you come here so we can try and be warm together.” It was too hard to resist so Harry let Sirius pull him in close and he was so warm. He buried his face into the crook of Sirius’ neck and Sirius flinched. Harry moaned in distress.

“Hey no, I was just surprised. Come back here.” Fingers crept through his hair and Harry yanked his head away before they could grab. “Not good huh, here shift a bit. There we go that’s better.” Arms curled around his waist and Harry leaned back against Sirius’ chest and closed his stupid freaky eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Harry knew that wasn’t true. He bit his lip. “Did you want –” his voice stopped up, “– back?” he reached for his gloves.

“No, fuck, no.” Sirius hands closed around his. “Harry you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I had sex with Snape.” The bitter self-hatred that had been safely buried under apathy boiled up scalding him.
“I can’t claim I’m happy about that, but Harry I only care that you said it was ‘rotten’.”

“What difference does that make?”

“That you didn’t like it. I mean, I’m selfish enough that I wouldn’t be thrilled if you were running around proclaiming him the shag of the century – ”

Harry snorted, “Not hardly.”

“– but that would be better than rotten.” Sirius sounded upset and he was shaking now. Harry twisted guiltily in on himself. He was making a lot of fuss about nothing.

“It wasn’t bad. It’s not like it hurt much or anything.”

The chest beneath him shook as Sirius took a deep breath, “Harry that is not a criteria for successful sex.”

“I know that,” Harry said indignantly.

“Please tell me we’ve being doing better than that.”

“Huh?”

*Please* tell me you’re not thinking – hey sex with Sirius is pretty good it hardly hurts at all.” Sirius took a quick double breath. Abruptly his magic, which had been warm and soothing, went electric sharp and spikey. “Tell me I haven’t hurt you.”

He tried to scrabble backwards, but Harry was sitting on his lap and he flung his arms around him so they stayed together.

“What? No! What are you even talking about?” Harry hung on tight and gradually the sharp points faded back into the welcoming swell of Sirius’ magic and the tense body relaxed again.

“Sorry,” said Sirius, “I’m supposed to be comforting you, I didn’t mean to come unglued. I just – Do not ever let me hurt you okay. I don’t care what it is, do not let me hurt you.”

“I won’t,” said Harry, although he had no idea why Sirius was getting so het up. Everything with Sirius was wonderful. And really, physical pain was hardly the worse thing in the world, he wouldn’t care if Sirius did hurt him as long as Sirius stayed.

Sirius groaned out loud, “I can practically hear you thinking, alley cat. Let’s try this. How would you feel if you hurt me?”

“I’d never hurt you.”

“But if one day you thought, huh, bondage sounds fun, and I agreed because I didn’t want to upset you, and then I had a screaming fit and set fire to the bed because I forgot where I was for a moment – ”

“You do that too?”

“Ah hell. Of course they haunt you too. Ghost memories are the worst, right?”

“Muggles call them flashbacks. And yes.”

Sirius squeezed his hand in sympathy, “That fit was before I had the pleasure of the death eaters
extended company. Now I’d probably burn down the whole house.” He paused and shifted uncomfortably. “My mother liked full-body binds as a punishment. Or just in general. It keeps children out of mischief and looking respectable.”

The tight hot rush of fury made Harry dizzy, “I will never, ever tie you up,” he swore.

“Good. I won’t tie you up either. But you notice the critical step that got missed, I should have said it would upset me. I mean I didn’t because Gervase would have got frustrated with me and I didn’t want that, but he ended up furious with me and went off to, I don’t even know, and I was too freaked out to get control of my magic so after I flooded the room with too much water I had to go to James and Lily to get the soaking wet, half burned ropes off my wrists. Which is definitely in the top ten most embarrassing things that have happened to me and was probably more traumatising than freaking out and setting the bed on fire in the first place, but they let me stay the weekend and eat my weight in cake so it was all good. I think I’ve wandered off my point.”

“Yes but that’s okay. Please can I have Gervase’s last name and address?”

“You can have any –” Sirius stopped and looked at him suspiciously, “Why do you want Gervase’s last name and address?”

“So I can send him flowers for being a total dick because if he wasn’t a total dick he might still be your boyfriend, and then I couldn’t be.” Harry’d rather send him emetic chocolates but Sirius wouldn’t be happy about that. Besides, thanks to Neville, he knew exactly which flowers to put in a bouquet to say, *I would really like to kill you, please give me an excuse* so that would have to do.

“You can if you like but words have already been had.”

“I can be just as threatening as James,” Harry sulked.

“Of course you can. And it wasn’t James. It was Lily. I said they didn’t need to, that it was my fault, but that just seemed to make them madder.”

“Lily?”

“Yes, she said she wasn’t having any nonsense about duels because Gervase wasn’t worth it, grabbed her leather jacket, and took off. I thought James would go after her but he said if he left me alone Lily would kill him next so he was sticking right where he was. I have no idea what she did because she wouldn’t tell us but it can’t have been too bad, because when she came back the first thing she said was, *oh god, I did not hex that sorry motherfucker enough*, then she made us much watch the Pink Panther again and let me fall asleep with my head on her lap.

“After that if he saw one of us Gervase used to turn around and walk off in the opposite direction as fast as he could, which given he liked charmed pureblood robes wasn’t that fast and really more of a waddle. Lily said he was the last straw, I clearly had no taste in men and wasn’t allowed to date anyone else without her permission.” Sirius put his hand over his mouth as if to physically stop himself talking.

Harry coiled himself around Sirius and kissed his neck, “I’m glad Lily was there. But I still want to send him flowers. It’s the polite thing to do.”

Sirius chuckled rustily, “You and Lily together would be hell on wheels.”

Harry hugged him tighter, “So we agree,” he said. “No tying up. No restraints.” And no body binds, he thought fiercely.
“Yes definitely. But that wasn’t really my point. My point if I hadn’t said anything, you might have used a full body bind on me, maybe as a joke.”

The idea of it made Harry feel ill.

“See, you wouldn’t want me to let you hurt me.”

“No,” said Harry. “Please don’t, don’t ever.”

“So turn that around, think how I would feel if you let me hurt you.”

“But,” because Sirius was Sirius and Harry was only Harry.

“But nothing. Are we agreed?”

“Okay,” because Sirius was so nice obviously he would feel bad, and Harry didn’t ever want to make Sirius feel bad. He took a breath,

“And you’re not, you’re not too mad with me, that I slept with Snape?”

“I’m not mad at all. Not with you.”

“Or with Snape, because the sex wasn’t that bad honest. It just made me lonely. It was what he said afterwards that hurt.”

Harry honestly hadn’t been that bothered. Snape had claimed he needed something to explain to Riddle why he was staying in Hogwarts and not joining the Death Eater forces. Apparently the opportunity to fuck Harry would be convincing. By that point in the war Harry was so numb he couldn’t have cared one way or the other and so it was decided. And it was all could have been worse until Snape, unsatisfied by Harry’s lack of reaction had asked what his precious godfather would think.

“Of course it bloody was.”

Harry blinked timidly at Sirius, he’d never thought Sirius was particularly like his godfather until now.

“Oh Harry love, please don’t look at me like that. I’m not mad with you. I’m furious with Snape, of course he couldn’t pass up the chance to sharpen that vicious tongue of his. But I’m not mad with you.”

Sirius was holding him so carefully, his magic so warm and welcoming that Harry believed him. He rested his head on Sirius’ shoulder and thought maybe, maybe his godfather would forgive him after all.

“What about James?” he asked. Because what would his father think.

“James does not actually get to have an opinion on this,” said Sirius tightly.

“But,”

“It has nothing to do with him. But it would be silly of you to worry. Jay is a total fluffy bunny of a person, he doesn’t care what you do as long as you’re happy.”

Harry had to sit up and look at Sirius then, because did Sirius know his best friend at all. James Potter was not a fluffy bunny. Harry’s own Slytherin tendencies made a lot more sense to him now
he’d met James.

Sirius was just smiling fondly and Harry realized that was because James was like that with him. James would be like that as a father. Harry would have thought knowing a James would mean he’d miss his own father less. He would have been wrong.

Sirius sat quietly holding Harry who’d thankfully lost that frantic edge of desperation and now just seemed softly melancholy.

“It was my stupid freaky eyes,” said Harry.

“Huh? You have nice eyes.” Not that Sirius had particularly noticed Harry’s eyes, too caught up in his smile, but when he smiled Harry’s eyes glinted with magic and mischief and yeah, they were nice eyes.

“Give over. R- my friend could barely bring himself to look me in the eye. They’re freaky. And green. The green was enough for Snape.”

Sirius growled. Green eyes. Of course. He had been wondering why Snape had been interested in Harry, because from what he could tell Snape leaned towards the women only side of things. But green eyes made a horrible sort of sense.

Reverse the idea that James wouldn’t care, James was definitely going to have opinions if he ever figured this out. And now Sirius thought about it Harry’s eyes probably were close to Lily-green and his ‘I can’t believe you just said that look’ was very Lilyish too, though whether that was a similarity of appearance or temperament he wasn’t sure. Harry had Potter-black hair to grab and Lily-green eyes, of course Snape hadn’t been able to resist.

Weirdly Sirius wasn’t even angry, “I honestly think I will kill him this time,” he said reflectively.

“No you can’t,” gasped Harry. “He didn’t do anything wrong, it wasn’t his fault.”

“Harry.”

“No. He probably doesn’t even remember me.”

Sirius scowled, that was not the point. On the other hand charging in and creating a huge mess wasn’t fair to Harry either, particularly as he made his wishes clear,

“Alright, I won’t say a word or do a thing, as long as Snape keeps his mouth shut.”

“Deal,” said Harry, smiling like he knew something Sirius didn’t.

Sirius ducked his head to hide his face. He’d like Harry to have won that argument, but if there was one thing he knew for certain it was that Snape was constitutionally incapable of keeping his mouth shut, especially if it would be the sensible thing to do.

“We don’t have to go to the meeting,” he said, because he could at least let Harry put the whole confrontation off.

“No. We’re being a distraction. I said I would.”

“We should probably get going then.”
“Umm,” agreed Harry, without moving. He shifted so he could look at Sirius, speculation in his gaze.

“Alley cat?”

“I was wondering…”

“Uh huh, you were wondering?”

“Would you like a blow job?” asked Harry all earnest innocence and god but his alley cat was going to kill him.

“Is that a trick question?” He’d have thought that would be the last thing Harry was interested in after the conversation they’d just had.

“No. I want to, because you’re wonderful and when you’re about to come you whine just like Snuffles and I bet if I could do it just right you’d kick your leg too.” Harry sounded like he was settling in for long-term experimentation. He was definitely going to kill him.

“Also,” Harry glanced up at him from under his lashes.

Sirius ran his finger down Harry’s nose, “Yes, you incorrigible flirt.”

“That way I get to go to the meeting with muddy knees. I bet you a galleon Mrs Weasley calls me a hussy.”

Sirius shouted with laughter. His alley cat was going to kill them all.
Bill followed his parents into the Order meeting. It was weird being back at Hogwarts and seeing it from the teacher’s side of things. He was walking into the staff room which had been a place of unimaginable mystery but was in fact just an ordinary room filled shabby mismatched sofas arranged around a stained coffee table.

He took a sofa on the edge of things and Charlie slumped down beside him. Charlie was in a mood. He hadn’t wanted to come all the way back from Romania for another round of ‘talking themselves into a coma’. Bill couldn’t blame him. He wasn’t convinced by the Order. He loved his parents dearly but they weren’t the people he’d pick for a secret organisation that was supposed to be taking decisive action to destroy you-know-who and his forces.

Personally Bill thought the Order would be improved enormously by the addition of a couple of Slytherins. They were the ones currently on the front lines as you-know-who carved his way back through their families. Bill had grown up scared of the dark forces at work outside of his family’s home. His Slytherin friends had grown up with those dark forces inside their homes.

(Bill actually had Slytherin friends because when their bastard of a third year DADA professor had done Boggarts he’d delighting in forcing his Slytherin pupils to step forward again and again so he could watch their fathers screaming under you-know-who’s cruciatus. Then Everett Rowle had ended up at the front, despite the Slytherins efforts to shuffle him to the back of the line, and it was his mother. Bill was a Weasley, he had the same temper everyone in his family did, he was just better at hiding it. Bill had been practicing blasting hexes for emergencies since he was six and old enough to point a wand. The professor crashed into the wall with a satisfying crunch.

Everything would have been fine except, while Bill dealt with the Boggart, Charlie, who’d felt Bill’s yank on the magic they shared, had excused himself from Charms and run all the way to the DADA classroom coming in just as the bastard professor recovered himself enough to try a counter attack. Charlie hit the wall, and Bill came back to himself pinned to the DADA classroom floor by Everett, and Archie Speedwell. He’d broken both his hands breaking that bastard professor’s face.

There was a lot of shouting after that as the Professors poured in to see what on earth all the shrieking was about. The bastard professor ended up leaving, apparently he was still suffering from
fighting you-know-who as an Auror, and he’d been decorated three times. He hadn’t meant to hurt Charlie at all. And really Charlie shouldn’t have been there in the first place. So…

Bill thought that was ridiculous. He pointed out the bastard had been tormenting the Slytherin students but nobody seemed interested in bothering about that. Everett explained to him they couldn’t complain because they couldn’t risk any more attention. So Bill had gone quiet and accepted the loss of ten points for unacceptable classroom behaviour. He’d never quite forgiven any of the professors involved.

Except Professor Black. Professor Black was a bit of a mystery who slunk around Hogwarts in his hooded robe like he was one of the shadows come to life. Eleven year old Bill had despised him, he’d betrayed his best friends and there couldn’t be any forgiveness for that. But seeing his fellow students Boggarts, seeing adults helpless and screaming in pain, had cracked the certainties of his childhood and shaken some sense into him.

So when Professor Black had quietly asked him if he was going to go around throwing punches did he want to be taught how to do it properly so he didn’t break his hands, Bill had said yes, mostly out of curiosity. He’d dragged Charlie along too because Charlie had been moping. Professor Black had duly shown them both how to curl their thumb along the outside of their fingers and angle their wrist so they struck with the first two knuckles.

Professor Potter had turned to up to shout at them about half way through the lesson. Bill had been nerved up enough that he would have told him to leave Professor Black alone, except it turned out Professor Potter was shouting at them for having the lesson in sight of the castle and after they’d relocated he’d joined in the demonstration until they were all collapsed on the grass exhausted.

This year Everett had owled Bill the day before Midsummer and the Dark Revel where you-know-who inducted a new dozen death eaters. Don’t believe another thing I tell you.

Bill had owled back, If you tell me it’s true, I’ll believe anything you say and signed it your Belinda because Wilhelmina was too obvious. The only reply was from a scruffy owl he didn’t recognize, Idiot Gryffindor.

Once you-know-who had the purebloods subdued the dark bastard would turn his full attention on the rest of them but in the Order seemed to feel any urgency. The only plan seemed to be to wait for Neville to get old enough to put up a fight. Neville was Ron’s age. If Bill was Frank Longbottom he’d have hexed the whole Order senseless. It made him furious that they were sitting around yapping while Everett was forced into serving the monster who’d haunted his childhood. But then nobody here cared about Everett.

Nor would saying anything would do any good. Dumbledore would only smile at him, call him young and impulsive and insist that cooler heads needed to prevail. There was no arguing with that sort of statement, anything you said would just be held up as evidence against you.

Amusingly Professor Potter seemed to share his idea about the pointlessness of being at the meeting. He was sitting in one of the armchairs and slowly falling asleep. Every now then his head would bob, he’d look up and around, recognize that they were still chewing over the same conversations, and his head would drop again.

Bill could never quite decide what he thought about Professor Potter. He admired the way the man always stood up for poor Neville. He was constantly reminding the Order that Neville was only a child. Nobody seemed to be listening but at least someone was saying it. It was the more admirable because Potter had lost so much it would be understandable if his sole focus was destroying you-know-who. Bill couldn’t imagine being so calmly reasonable if something happened to Fleur.
Bill’s desire to have you-know-who destroyed was not altruistic, he wanted to get on with the business of living. He wanted to marry Fleur but not while that dark bastard was still murdering with impunity. James Potter had been one of the most prominent purebloods standing against him, and Potter had followed his heart, married a muggle-born and put them both in the firing line. Given his family, Bill’s profile was uncomfortably high and with Fleur’s Veela heritage a lot of death eaters didn’t even consider her human.

Fleur was arguing against him, saying she wanted to be married to him, to stand with him in danger as well as safety. They were both agreed though, no children until the monster was gone. Bill glanced reflexively at Charlie. Before he’d always thought of himself in Black’s place, the one who needed to protect his friends, but now he was imagining having a wife and child he was so desperate to protect he’d ask Charlie to face the monster and keep the secret for him. But then he wouldn’t need to ask, Charlie would volunteer. He had no idea how Potter and Black hadn’t gone mad.

Thinking about it, Bill had the uncomfortable realisation that when Liliana Rose and the baby died, the Potters and Black had all been younger than Charlie was now. It made him angry in a way he couldn’t quite articulate.

“You okay?” asked Charlie.

“Of course.” Bill realized he was letting his magic build enough that he’d started drawing on Charlie’s. He hastily let it disperse, tried anyway, he was more worked up than he thought. Charlie wrapped his hand around Bill’s arm and helped him release it.

“Let’s try that again,” said Charlie. “I say, are you okay; you say, no I’m gearing up my magic like I’m about to tackle a fifth dynasty tomb; I say, what’s wrong; and you tell me. Is Fleur okay?”

“It’s annoying when you do that, and Fleur’s fine.”

“So-o-o.”

Why had Bill ever thought Charlie was his favourite brother.

“We work on separate continents,” he scowled. “Why do we even share magic anymore?”

In times of crisis family often pooled magic, it was what helped make the heads of families so powerful. But close family sometimes shared magic more regularly. Bill wasn’t entirely sure Fred and George even had separate magics anymore. And five or six times over the years he had a sudden yank on his magic and had to drop everything he was doing and find a floo so he could be sure his idiot brother hadn’t finally got eaten by a dragon. Then there was the time the desert, well it hadn’t eaten him, no matter what Charlie yelled after helping dig him out.

“Because you’re the sort of idiot who gets eaten by deserts.”

“Me! You’re the one who works with fire breathing creatures with plenty of teeth.”

“Still not the one who’s actually been eaten.”

“That was a cascading level three entropic ward failure, the desert had in no way eaten me.”

“I chain apparated across the Mediterranean to find a confused set of goblins staring at a hole in the sand where your camp wasn’t. We only knew you were alive because you were still drawing on my magic to shore up the walls of that tomb. But no, of course it hadn’t eaten you.”
“Oh right, and that time I fell over in a performance review because somebody decided he needed all my magic to contain a crazy dragon –”

“It was ill.”

“That makes it so much better. You conked out straight afterwards, maybe it hadn’t eaten you but how was I supposed to know that.”

They glared at each other. There was a faint tug on the more distant bond they both shared with their father, in the back of their minds they heard his voice scold, Boys.

They glared at each other some more. Finally Bill said,

“Sorry. I’m just, I’m just sick of you-know-who. I’m not even scared anymore –” then he thought of all the ways he was terrified for Fleur and Charlie and his family, “– no that’s a lie. I’m still scared out my mind, but I’m sick of him too.”

“I am sorry about Everett,” said Charlie.

Bill felt his face tighten, “I should have been able to help him.”

“He’s the oldest, with three younger sisters and a younger brother. You would have done exactly the same thing.”

“Are you angry about that?”

“No, I enjoy thinking about my brother joining the death eaters to protect me. You can’t be any more sick of that monster than I am.”

Bill smiled, of course he and Charlie were on the same page. “We’ll talk about this later, okay? It’s time to get in on the Plan.”

Charlie nodded slowly and smiled back.

To distract himself from the need to get started now, now, now, Bill started to listen in to the clutches of conversation around the room.

Shacklebolt was grumbling to Moody,

“Potter could at least do us the honour of pretending to pay attention. Don’t get me wrong everything the poor guy has lost, I’d understand if he wanted to spend his days passed out drunk, but no, he runs around energetically doing practically everything except figuring out how to defeat you-know-who.”

“Lost his nerve and running scared,” huffed Moody. “Sad to see. We could use him in the fight but he spends all his time fussing over Hogwarts regulations like this is some sort of staff meeting.”

“Apparently he gets really obstreperous in actual staff meetings – because timetable scheduling is important when facing a dark lord, obviously.”

Tonks leaned forward shyly sly, “You’ll regret it if you start them arguing about checking the students for dark marks again.”

Shacklebolt groaned out loud, “Oh Merlin, don’t even mention it. That’s an hour out of my life I’ll never get back, and they must have been arguing about it in the actual staff meeting even longer.”
Bill gritted his teeth. He had considered that vitally important and was deeply grateful to Potter for championing it. As long as the policy that all students would be checked for the dark mark was loudly announced, you-know-who would refrain from marking the children until they’d left Hogwarts. Which meant, assuming the Order stopped nibbling biscuits and actually did something, those children would have the chance of escaping you-know-who’s clutches. Everett’s younger brother was in Ginny’s year.

Snape, because he had a weird set of priorities – did he not realize most of his students and their parents were desperate for any chance to put off becoming marked any way they could – had maintained they couldn’t possibly check the children for dark marks, it would humiliate the Slytherin students and outrage their parents.

Potter, who thankfully had a grasp on the situation, insisted it was the only protection they could offer their students. Bill and Charlie had done their best to support him, but the argument had actually been won when Black yawned, stretched out his legs, and asked why they were bothering to argue about the baby Slytherins who were all death eaters in training anyway.

It was clear from the sudden shuffling and self-conscious looks that had been pretty much what everyone had been thinking but it made them uncomfortable to hear it stated so plainly.

The argument had continued for a bit but nobody wanted to support Black, even Snape’s tendency to disagree violently with Potter was derailed by his desire to disagree violently with Black. And so the policy was put in place.

Bill did not fool himself that Black’s intervention had been accidental the way everybody else seemed to be able to. Even now Tonks was saying,

“Did you see the vicious look Potter sent his way when he disagreed with him?”

“Oh boy, I’m sure Black paid for that later,” laughed Shacklebolt.

Moody growled. “They should have chucked Black out the Order years ago. He gave in to you-know-who once, he’ll do it again.”

“Now Alastor,” said Shacklebolt patiently. “You know if we kicked Black out the death eaters would be only too pleased to scoop him back up. Black’s practically brother-in-law to Lucius Malfoy. It’s essential we don’t allow you-know-who’s stooge access to the resources Black represents.”

“That doesn’t make it better. Still, at least Potter makes himself useful and keeps Black under control. I’d love to know how he wrestled those voting proxies out of him.”

Bill’s dad leaned into the conversation, “It’s not right. We should split the pair of them up. Continually rubbing against old sores is doing neither of them any good.”

“You’re too nice Arthur. I expect it does Potter the world of good. And somebody has to keep Black in line. You realize he didn’t even want to bring his little muggle boyfriend by so that we can check he hasn’t fallen for you-know-who’s blandishments a second time. Potter had put paid to that in short order and whatever he’d said, Black slunk away looking like a whipped dog.”

This was another thing Bill did not understand about Potter. In Order meetings he consistently acted as if he couldn’t stand Black and was looking for any way to cut him down. Or at least he said all the right words, and Black would look appropriately hangdog but their actions never really tallied up.
Bill had five brothers, he knew how they’d shy away from pinches and jabs given out of sight of parental vision. Black never shied away from Potter. He’d shift so his unprotected back was towards Potter and he could face the rest of the room which was a complete give away. Oh he’d hang his head and shuffle his feet when Potter shouted but Bill could recognize somebody displaying contrition without feeling it. Black’s most disconcerting nervous trick of watching someone intently while turning his head aside only showed up when he was talking to Dumbledore, or McGonagall, or one of the others, never Potter.

That nobody else noticed this flummoxed Bill. Apparently everyone in the Order had the observational skills of flobberworms Which was just as well for Potter and Black because they were really obvious.

Perhaps it was because Bill and Charlie had known them both as Professors. Not that they didn’t play the same weird game at Hogwarts, but no one who took their classes would ever believe Professor Potter hated Professor Black. Bill had been keeping quiet since that long ago punching lesson when Professor Black somehow gained two black eyes during the walk back to the castle. Like he said, really obvious.

He was pulled from his thoughts when Charlie suddenly went stiff and sharp next to him without actually moving at all. Bill refocused, following the direction of his brother’s stare.

“No it’s quite wrong the way they all blame Black,” Jones was saying. “Potter was the one who chose him. He knew Black wasn’t a real man. How did expect someone like that to stand firm against you-know-who.”

Bill leaned closer to Charlie, “She has no idea what she’s talking about, don’t listen to her.”

“You think I don’t hear that all the time.”

Bill wanted to go punch the whole world. Sometimes, deep inside his own head, he shamefully understood their parents’ desire for Charlie to keep his preferences secret. Their world could be so cruel, why give them a target. He wasn’t surprised Charlie didn’t, and it wasn’t Black’s influence no matter what Mum claimed, Charlie was just too honest for that sort of long term deception. He might have agreed not to make it obvious though if Mum hadn’t kept flinging girls at his head like she might get lucky and knock Charlie unconscious long enough for one of them to grab him.

Jones was still explaining to Vance how it was unfair to expect a man like that to have any sort of courage at all and Vance was nodding along. Bill leaned back over to Charlie,

“Well you would be my one and only pick for Secret Keeper,” he said. It felt less like an honour and more of a betrayal, but Charlie’s stone façade cracked and he turned to smile at him hopeless young,

“Really truly?”

“Really truly. Now tell me how things are going with the dragons.” Charlie had already told him at length but he somehow always managed to find something new to say. Bill wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or worried.

They were deep into the intricacies of a dragon’s feeding schedule, which was interesting if gross, Bill did not need the image in his head of a dead sheep being flopped around with a Leviosa to try and attract the dragon’s attention, thank you all the same Charlie; when the door opened and Neville and his parents came in.
“I swear if they treated any of the kids like that I’d murder them all,” Charlie muttered.

Bill watched Neville scurrying along like a nervous rabbit and nodded in agreement. “Maybe the Chosen One has to kill you-know-who but we could line the dark bastard up for him.”

“Hell, I reckon Potter and Black would hold that monster down for him.”

Bill nodded and wondered if maybe that was the Plan. There had to be a Plan but Bill couldn’t for the life of him figure it out. Charlie agreed with him that the Plan must exist, but was convinced it involved Black and some clever piece of Arithmancy magic, despite Arithmancy requiring intense set up that made it impractical in fights. But then Charlie’d had a raging crush on Professor Black all of third and fourth year. Bill had actually gone to speak to Professor Black about it, somehow the man had heroically managed not to laugh in Bill’s overly earnest face.

Bill had apologised later when he’d grown up enough to have some sense, Professor Black had laughed at him then.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, you were adorable. And you got through your whole speech without insulting me once which is more than anyone else has been able to do.”

A horrid feeling stole over Bill, “My mum hasn’t talked to you, has she?”

“I wouldn’t say talked exactly.”

“Oh God. I am so sorry.”

“It’s not your job to apologise for her. And better me than your poor brother.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, she was still politer about it than my mother.”

“Oh God.”

Black dragged him down to the Three Broomsticks and bought him a commiseratory drink. Obviously Bill had to buy him one back and before he knew where he was, an amused Charlie was hauling his drunk self home. Potter turned up for Black.

“Oh no,” said Black, “I’m in the dog house now.”

“You wish,” said Potter. “Particularly at six o’clock this morning.”

“Oh no,” Black sounded truly horrified. “Not the mob.”

“Oh yes. Hope your hangover isn’t too bad.”

“You’re mean. I’m not going home with you, I’m going with the Weasleys, they won’t notice an extra one.”

“Really?”

“No, not really. Of course I’m going home with you. I’ll even put up with your mob such is the depths of my devotion for you.”

“Oh Merlin, you’re going to throw up as soon as we get outside, aren’t you.”
“No,” said Black shiftily.

“Yes. I should leave you to die in the gutter.” Potter heaved Black to his fumbly feet.

“A nice peaceful gutter sounds just the thing.”

“I’m too mean for that, come along.”

Whining all the way like a fretful younger brother, Black went along. He did indeed throw up as soon as the cold night air hit him. Potter moaned and groaned and kept him on his feet.

So very obvious that there was a Plan. And now Charlie was back, they were going to find out what the Plan was, or at least get it agreed that he and Charlie could help.

Anything had to better than throwing the whole thing on Neville’s hunched shoulders. Though the boy cast a nice, solid Patronous. Bill wasn’t sure he could have managed the same at that age, it took him most of sixth year to get it down. Though he’d immediately turned around and taught the spell to Charlie who managed a corporal Patronous by Christmas of his fifth year. It was a dragon of course. A Chinese Fireball, the Gryffindor dragon apparently, though Bill was happy to leave identifying dragons to his brother.

Neville’s big silver dog bounded into the room. His huge shaggy head glanced around, and it made straight for Potter, who shoved it easily aside with one knee as if he’d done it a hundred times and then bent down to ruffle his hands through the silver fur.

Alice Longbottom hissed between her teeth. She’d moved over to stand by Jones and Vance. Bill had been keeping half an ear on their conversation.

“They might be able to pull the wool over Frank’s eyes but I pay attention to my son. I know where he at all times even when he’s trying to hide. We’ve spent weeks working with him and nothing. He disappears with Potter, Black, and Black’s disgraceful muggle boyfriend and turns up bare hours later able to cast one perfectly. It’s not right.”

“Maybe he just needed a different approach,” suggested Vance.

“Do you think we didn’t try different approaches? How can he always turn to them? They’ve already let down one Prophecy child, Harry Potter is dead because of the two of them, yet Neville turns to them constantly. He picks Black’s company over his own father’s.”

Privately Bill thought it was likely because Potter and Black were the only members of the Order not creepily invested in turning Neville into an assassin. Which was of course yet more evidence for the Plan.

“And it drives me mad how Potter constantly harps on about Neville’s age. Does he think we haven’t noticed? He got his son killed, he doesn’t get to steal ours.”

“Alice, don’t you think you’re being a little irrational,” soothed Vance, “Potter doesn’t want to steal your son. He just wants to protect him the way he couldn’t protect Harry. And he is the one who supported you when Moody suggested Neville be taken away for advanced training.”

Alice’s breath hissed through her teeth again. “That man.”

“See, Potter wants what’s best for Neville.”

“So why are he and Black constantly criticizing Neville’s training, do they think I like putting my
“Neville’s doing very well though. Just look at his Patronous.”

The dog, after buffeting Potter’s legs, bounded back to Neville, licked his face, and vanished. Alice huffed low in her throat. “I’d tell Frank but what good would that do. He’s so proud of Neville for managing a corporal Patronous. It would just upset him. He’s in a good mood now, it’s a good start to the year, how would spoiling things by telling him Black was involved help?”

“It wouldn’t,” said Jones. “Leave it be. Neville can cast a strong Patronous, isn’t that the important thing.”

Alice’s pinched face clearly said she wasn’t sure about that if Black was involved but the words remained unspoken. She rubbed her hands over her face,

“Yes, yes, that’s what important,” one hand waved in dismissal. “But tell me, is it true Black’s bringing his muggle boyfriend to the meeting?”

“Potter didn’t give him much choice – ” Vance began before breaking off as Neville came over,

“Did you see Mum?”

“Yes very good dear. Go can go and help yourself to the biscuits.”

“Thanks Mum.”

Neville didn’t go for the biscuits. He retreated to stand near Potter who immediately started to demonstrate some spell, a conjuring judging by the wand movements. He put his arm around Neville’s shoulders and careful demonstrated the swirl and point.

Charlie bumped him with his elbow, “We can talk to them about the Plan later this evening, right?”

“Right.” It was time to finish this.

He had given up on the Order meeting altogether and was quietly playing Botticelli with Charlie (and picking dragon tamers was cheating, Charlie better watch out, just because Bill couldn’t thump him right now didn’t mean he couldn’t thump him later) when the door creaked open and Black peered in.

“Where the hell have you been?” snapped Potter.

Black cringed on cue,

“Sorry we’re late,” he grovelled.

“And so you should be,” snarled Potter.

Dumbledore stepped forward, “Now James my boy, that’s no way to welcome our guest. We do have a guest, I trust.”

“Oh yes,” Black smiled and drew a young man into the room behind him, “this is Harry.”

Bill stared.

Harry was short and sturdy with a shock of dark hair and bright green eyes. He was wearing a
bedraggled sweater with one unravelling sleeve, worn jeans, and scuffed trainers. The jeans had muddy knees.

Potter’s eyebrows arched and Black shrugged helplessly. Bill’s eyes whipped back up to Harry’s face, as Harry said,

“Sorry we’re late, we got distracted,” and licked his lips with slow deliberation right in front of everyone. Then he leaned against Black’s arm and looked up at him with such promise that Bill could feel himself blushing at the implication.

The gasp ran around the room like a rising ghost. Harry couldn’t have made it more obvious if he, well actually Bill didn’t want to think about how Harry could have made it more obvious because his mother,

“Well really,” and there was Bill’s mother in full flow. “I have never seen such a shameless display. Headmaster must we continue to endure the presence of this, this hussy.”

“Whoo!” exclaimed Harry. He held out one hand to Black. “Galleon please.”

“Mercenary little goblin,” said Black fondly. “And what would you have done if you hadn’t won.”

“It was a sucker bet,” said Harry. “But if someone managed to hit her with a silencing charm, I guess you’d just had to have taken it out in trade.” He grinned cheekily.

Black’s head drooped mournfully, “Am I not to have a shred of reputation left to me, you reprobate?”

“I don’t like your reputation,” said Harry, green eyes flashing curse-dark. “I’m going to get you a whole new one.”

“Merlin save me, I’m doomed.”

“I could take Merlin,” said Harry.

Bill realized several things simultaneously. One, Black and his strange boyfriend had bet on his mother’s reaction to them, and been right, which was just all levels of embarrassing. Two, Black was actually handing over a galleon after Harry took to pouting. And three, Potter was going to bust something if he tried to restrain his laughter any longer.

Beside him Charlie sighed softly, and checking on him Bill found he was staring at Harry starry-eyed. He jabbed him sharply with his elbow. They did not need Charlie falling for Black’s boyfriend.

“No,” muttered Charlie, “I just…”

“Duels,” Bill glowered. “Black’s the old-fashioned sort, he probably still fights them to the death. And I am not going up against Potter as your second.”

Charlie looked at him, “You totally would.”

“Alright fine, I’d stand your second regardless, but I would make you regret it when we ended up dead. He’s not even that pretty.” Black was pretty, even Bill could see that. Harry was ordinary, except for those green eyes and the mischief scrawled across his face.

“He’s lovely, you heathen,” said Charlie. “But it isn’t that. It’s like Mum said, he isn’t ashamed.
I’ve never seen anyone with my, my deviancy so unashamed about it.”

That made dreadful sense. Even Bill, who’d happily curse anyone who insulted his brother, tended to think of it of something to be hidden from the light of day. Harry had strolled in, practically announced they were late because he’d stopped give Black a blow job, collected a round of shocked gasps and horrified looks, and was still completely brazen about it. Hell, he’d bet the reaction would be bad and still didn’t care.

Bill couldn’t exactly say he wanted to know when his brother had sex – as far as he was concerned, none of his siblings were having sex ever – but he wanted that freedom for him. Why should Charlie be ashamed, he wasn’t hurting anybody. When you had the likes of Lucius Malfoy swanking about the place, the idea that Charlie, his idiotic good-hearted little brother, should feel ashamed was obscene.

The rest of the Order were still staring at Harry. Even Dumbledore seemed taken aback. It wasn’t just the brazenness. Harry was obviously muggle, and muggle-born students were supposed to react to magic with fear-tinged awe. Somebody had forgotten to give Harry that memo though and his irreverence had caught them all off-guard.

“Hello Mr Harry,” said Neville into the awkward and growing silence. Bill couldn’t tell if he was genuinely oblivious to the tension, or pretending hard, but score one for Neville.

Harry spun round at his name, and the dangerous glitter left his eyes as he smiled at Neville, “Hey Neville, how’s it going. Found anymore cool plants?”

Neville sighed, “I wasn’t allowed back in the Greenhouse until I learnt my Patronous. My angel-wings have probably all died now because I haven’t renewed the hydration spells in time. They’re awfully delicate.”

“You’ll have to show me the basics, then I can help you look after them.”

“Thank you but that won’t be necessary,” said Alice Longbottom crisply.

“But Mum,” protested Neville.

“You’re supposed to be concentrating on your school work.”

“But Mum.”

“Listen to your mother Neville,” said Frank.

“Fine,” Neville slumped back into silence, but brightened when Harry gestured something Bill couldn’t see but he guessed meant later.

“So we’re here,” said Black hastily. “Harry these are,” he rattled their names off quickly.

Harry flashed the room a smile so sharp somebody should be bleeding. “How lovely to meet you all,” he said in that overly-charming way that actually meant – I hope all die in a fire. When his gaze fell on them, the smile softened, “Hey Bill, hey Charlie.” He waved. Bill waved back. Charlie sighed again, and Bill jabbed with his elbow again.

“Duels,” he reminded with a hiss.

“You stay away from my sons, you degenerate,” said their mother.
“Nah,” Harry grinned, sunnily pleased with himself, “I’ve always been like this.”

Potter finally cracked. He hid it well, managed to get his crossed hands over his face and stagger to Black so it looked like he was looming over him instead of doubling over with laughter, but Bill was looking for it so it was easy to see his gleeful amusement.

“Whoo!” cheered Harry and started looking round for his next victim. Bill shoved a protesting Charlie out of the firing line.

“Cease this ridiculous display immediately,” demanded Snape. “I am unsurprised that Black would take up with a moronic slut but I trust some manners are not too much to expect.”

Potter caught Black’s arm as he grabbed for his wand. Dumbledore said,

“Severus, please moderate your language, there are ladies present.”

“My apologies Headmaster. I was overcome that Black should so far forget himself as to introduce such a,” he paused to sniff, “loose muggle to our society.”

Potter let go of Black’s arm and his hand was on his own wand. Harry shook his head at them.

Charlie stopped protesting about being shoved away and yanked Bill backwards to join him. Neville scurried over to them. Bill tucked him safely in between them and they braced themselves.

He wasn’t expecting Harry to suddenly clasp his hands in front of him and shrink into penitent. He walked up to Snape and looked up at him earnestly,

“I’m sorry for throwing you out the Three Broomsticks, Mr Snape.”

“That’s Professor Snape,” growled Snape.

“I’m sure your break up with Sirius was very painful, so I understand why you’re all snappy and snarly.”

“I am not snappy and – did you just say – break up with Sirius!” Snape’s voice reached a powerful echoing crescendo of disgust. Bill, Charlie and Neville all flinched violently. For a second Bill honestly thought he was back in the Potions Classroom. He had to remind himself he was a full grown wizard and allowed to defend himself.

Black laughed, “Have a heart, alley cat. I never went out with Snape.”

“Really? You said your taste in men was bad, I’m afraid I just assumed.”

“My taste in men is not that bad, thank you very much.”

“Oh, oh that’s even worse, I’m so sorry, Mr Snape,” he patted Snape’s arm, leaping agilely backwards when Snape tried to swat him away. “Sirius is very wonderful but that’s no excuse for stalking him.”

“Stalking him?” shrieked Snape.

“Yes, and while your distaste for me is understandable, coming to the Three Broomsticks to harass me is unacceptable. But I’m sure you know that in your heart of hearts. I’m sure you recognize that your obsessive interest in Sirius and his sex life is really quite disturbing.”

There was a pause then as a white with fury Snape tried to recover his temper enough to say
something. That unfortunately made it easy to hear Hestia Jones,

“You know that actually makes a lot of sense.”

It did actually make sense. Bill didn’t believe a word of it, but it made sense. Any second now someone was going to say there was a fine line between love and hate and Snape’s goose would be permanently cooked. There was no way he could argue back without adding more evidence to the pyre.

Harry’s grin was evil, he knew it too.

“You little –” Snape grabbed Harry’s arms and shook him. Harry laughed as his teeth rattled.

“You want to call me names, death eater?” He yanked one hand free, slapping Snape across the face,

“That’s for Meggie and her dad.”

“Muggle friends of yours? Let’s see what happened to them. Was it your insolence that got them killed?”

“Stay the hell out of my head.” Harry tried to turn his head away but Snape dug his fingers into his jaw and yanked it back.

“But no this is fascinating. Such very wide eyes.”

“Stop this right now,” yelled Black, “Dumbledore, Harry is your guest.”

“Sirius, my boy, we must be sure.”

“Headmaster, I don’t believe this is wise,” said McGonagall.

“Minerva, we agreed,” said the Headmaster reproachfully.

“Severus is too angry.”

“I said stop this,” demanded Black. He tried to dart forward and help but Moody and Shacklebolt blocked his way. After a moment where Potter clearly considered to hell with them all, he dragged Black away pinning one arm painfully.

“Your eyes,” said Snape.

Harry whimpered. He looked frozen under the grip of the legilimens.

“I can only get glimpses, but yes,” Snape looked absolutely delighted. “Did you know I’ve been here before you Black?”

Potter hastily switched grips so he could keep hold of Black without breaking his arm.

Snape’s face settled into focused concentration, “Let’s see more.”

Harry mouthed, no, but there was no sound.

“What’s that, Lucius fucked you too. A real party favour. Is he as fun for you Black?”

Several things happened at once. Harry managed to yank away, tripping and stumbling to his
knees. Black got away from Potter, or no, Potter had stopped holding him back as they both dived across the room. Shacklebolt grabbed for Black but was slammed aside by an absolute wall of magic. Magic was suddenly filling the room, thick and heavy and furious.

Bill felt his own magic leap into full alert like it had heard a call to arms.

“What the hell?”

Beside him Charlie yelped, “It’s Black, he’s—”

“Mad as hell?”

“That too. He’s calling on the Black family magic. We’re related, and we’re close. It’s putting us on alert.”

“I don’t remember this happening before. Not like this.” It was physically difficult not to charge across the room in Black’s support.

“None of the other Lord Blacks considered us family.”

Alright then, Bill gave up on pretending he was neutral in this fight and hit Shacklebolt with a stunner. Charlie hit Moody with a,

“What the hell was that?”

“Dragon-grade sedative. He’ll wake up sometime day after tomorrow.”

Potter had got to Harry, hauling him up and tucking his cloak over him, giving him his protection both literally and symbolically.

Dumbledore was holding his arms up for calm. Bill decided he’d keep his wand at the ready just in case.

Black had Snape at the point of his wand.

“You will never come near Harry again, or I will kill you.”

Snape’s face twisted up with hatred, “Doesn’t say much for your prowess that you think he’ll stray already.”

“Oh,” said Charlie, “Snape has a death wish. I had not noticed this before.”

“No,” Bill shook his head because that would imply there was some sort of thinking going on in Snape’s thick skull. “He’s just a moron with no idea when to hold his tongue.”

Black’s hand did not waver, “And you will have care how you speak of him, or I will call you to account.”

“You wouldn’t dare. You’re not one for a fair fight. I know. You tried to murder me years ago.”

“Snape. You were the one who wanted to know the secret. You were the one who wouldn’t let up until I told you. You were the one who threatened to out my boyfriend.”

“Well I can see why he wouldn’t want it known that he was sleeping with you.”

“He was muggle-born, you unspeakable arse. If my father had known he’d have had him killed. So
I told you what you wanted to shut you up. And then I got James, who stopped you getting yourself killed and managed to get the whole thing tied up in a vow of secrecy because James is a fucking genius. Now, you will let go of your goddamn grudge or I’m going to scatter your body parts from here to France. Do not push me on this.”

“And you would go straight to Azkaban if you did. There isn’t anybody who cares enough about you to keep you out. I could live with being dead if it meant you were screaming in your cell surrounded by Dementors.”

Which was when Harry got away from Potter, flew across the room, and slammed bodily into Snape, knocking him off his feet and crashing to the floor on top of him.

“Sirius is never going to Azkaban. Never. Do you hear? Never, never, never.” Harry had both fists locked in Snape’s hair and was smashing his head into the ground. “Never.”

“Oh Harry love.” Black dropped to his knees beside him. His wand had vanished back into its holster and he reached out with both hands. “Harry, come here. I’m right here.”

Harry turned to him, he was wild-eyed and wrecked, tears sliding down his face without him seeming to be aware of it.

“Harry.” Black pulled him up to his feet and into his arms. “Harry I’m right here.”

“Never. You are never going to that foul place. Never.”

A second fierce magic began to pulse through the room. Bill put a hand to his head as the pressure started to build behind his eyes.

“Calm down both of you.” Potter grabbed them both by the scruff of their sweaters and hauled them back. He shook them roughly, “Settle down before you blow the wards.”

The violent beat of magic eased into something bearable.

“Bill, Charlie, can you check Snape’s more or less in one piece. The rest of you, what the hell was that, since when do you just let Snape attack people?”

Charlie crouched beside Snape, “Still breathing, I don’t think his skulls cracked.” He cast a low-level Revivify. Bill stayed on his feet and watched his brother’s back. The rest of the Order were avoiding Potter’s gaze as Dumbledore explained how they need to be sure Harry wasn’t a spy.

“That doesn’t explain why you let Snape attack him.”

“We needed to know,” said Doge. “The boy has,” his mouth screwed up with distaste, “associated with both Snape and Malfoy. This needs to be investigated.”

“For Merlin’s sake, how do you think a born-muggle ended up associating with a couple of death eaters?”

The gaze-avoidance became more extreme. Into the silence Snape erupted,

“Get your fucking hands off me.”

“Happy to,” said Charlie stepping smartly away. Snape lurched to his feet, staggered a couple of steps, the righted himself against the wall.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together magisterially. “Now things have become very heated, I
“Shut up,” said Black. “We’re leaving. Come on Harry.”

“Black, you’re not going anywhere,” said Shacklebolt. Somebody had woken him up because things weren’t difficult enough already.

“Everybody calm down,” roared Potter as if he was trying to be heard across a Quidditch pitch. “Shacklebolt, Tonks, please take Snape and Moody to Madam Pomfrey with the Headmaster’s apologies. Bill, Charlie, please escort Sirius and Harry down to the kitchens. Keep Black there until I’ve had a chance to talk to him. Everybody else sit down.”

There was some shuffling but everybody else sat. Black sent Potter a fulminating look but allowed himself to be dragged to his feet and out the room. Bill did his best to look as if he was being as rough as possible about and felt mean when Harry sniffled.

Once they had split away from the four headed to the Hospital Wing, Bill relaxed and shook his shoulders out.

“Ugh, Snape gets worse.”

“His deluded obsession with Sirius is most concerning,” said Harry.

“You’re going to give me nightmares,” Black protested. “Snape is not obsessed with me, thank Merlin.”

“And nobody’s going to believe that after James is finished,” said Harry, brimming with self-satisfaction.

Bill wasn’t entirely sure that Snape wasn’t obsessed with Black. His mind was certainly one track when it came to man. Please Merlin it wasn’t a romantic obsession.

“See,” said Harry triumphantly, “Bill’s halfway to believing it already. Serves the man right. Threatening you like that.”

That Harry could consider that Snape’s crime of the evening made Bill wince.

“He shouldn’t have invaded your mind either,” said Black. “If I was a remotely decent Lord Black he’d already be dead at my feet.”

“But you’re not,” said Harry. “You’re a thoroughly indecent Lord Black.” He wriggled himself under Black’s arm. “Much nicer.”

“Harry.”

“No, you managed to avoid killing Snape for years. You’re not going to do it for me. He’s not worth you feeling guilty about it. He’s going to snipe at the wrong person sooner or later and that’ll be that.”

“If one of you do kill him,” said Charlie, “call me. Dragons eat all kinds of things.”

“Charlie!” Bill protested. Charlie just looked at him, shoulders rolled forward the way he did when he’d made up his mind and there was no changing it.

“It’s okay,” said Black, “we’re going to our best not to, right Harry?”
“Well I’m not wasting a perfectly good rumour by killing him now. I want him to have lots of time to suffer. I want all the first years to feel so sorry for him they forget to be scared.”

“He’s going to go completely mental,” said Black. Bill nodded in fervent agreement, Snape was going to be homicidal.

“Yeah,” Harry grinned and Bill noticed the green glow of his eyes was the exact shade of an Avada Kedvra. “Threatening you. I’m gonna make him wish you’d killed him.”

Harry, Bill decided, was a very scary person. No wonder Charlie liked him so much. After all, he was the idiot who ran off to play with dragons.

Chapter End Notes

in case it isn't clear this Snape has not slept with Harry, but he does have a habit of seeking out green-eyed fucks that he doesn't bother remembering anything about. Harry is just his type so he isn't particularly surprised to discover Harry has memories of sex with him that he doesn't specifically remember. He was only picking up brief flashes of Harry's memories through Harry's Occulmency and then only because Harry was distressed and it was already on the surface of his thoughts after his talk with Sirius. If Snape had been paying attention he might have noticed something was up but he was too delighted at getting one-up on Sirius to focus on anything else.
Chapter 24

Harry was so furious that Snape had threatened Sirius with Azkaban he wanted to howl. That was never going to let that happen to his Sirius, ever. He didn’t care if he had to burn the whole diseased heap down, it wasn’t getting its claws into his Sirius, not for a moment.

A little sanity had come back now he was away from the Order and he’d managed to convert his desire to see Snape rendered into bloody shreds to suffering from the curious stares of the Hogwarts students. It helped that he was fairly sure Snape would consider a violent end to be justification for his general hatred of the world but being laughed at by gangs of thirteen year olds was going to be pure torture.

He smiled to himself. Yeah, it was vindictive. So what. He’d been prepared to drop all his grudges on stepping into this new universe (secretly he’d been hoping Snape would turn out to be some sort of positive thinking hippie for the entertainment value) but the Order turned out to be full of the same assholes as before. They deserved everything that was coming to them. It helped that it wasn’t Harry being over-sensitive or not understanding what was good for him like he’d been told before. James clearly hated them all like burning too.

Harry just had to make sure he didn’t let them get to him. As much as it infuriated he had to acknowledge Snape was a weak spot in his armour. The man annoyed him so badly he forgot to be wary. Snape’s attack had caught completely by surprise. That was his fault. He’d been criminally stupid. And in moments Snape had become the monster from his fifth year rooting around in his head like he had some sort of right to it.

Snape had been going for his memories of Sirius, snatching fingers so malicious they scalded his mind as they raked through it. Harry had thrown up those memories of Snape in pure self-protection. They were close enough to what Snape was looking for, sex, and near the top of his mind after his conversation with Sirius.

For a moment he hadn’t even realized what he’d done, just had the relief of satisfying Snape’s grasping hands. Then of course Snape’s satisfaction was slicking like oil through his mind. He’d hadn’t been able to react to that, too caught in slamming up all his walls to keep Snape from finding his memories of that other universe. And with Snape’s hooks in him he hadn’t been strong enough to stop him seizing on flashes of those memories. They were closely linked in Harry’s head to his time with Lucius and Snape had been following the trail tugging on one flash of memory after another. It hadn’t seemed a big sacrifice to divert him away from his true secrets into the cul-de-sac of Lucius. It wasn’t even a surprise to Snape, he’d shared toys with Lucius in his universe too.

It wasn’t until he heard Snape’s distant voice taunting Sirius he realized what he’d done. He’d shamed Sirius with his actions. His writhing disgust with himself had been blasted away by his terror when Snape threatened Sirius with Azkaban (no, never, Harry didn’t care what it took, never) but now that disgust was back as he remembered Snape’s spiteful glee.

Sirius spelled the stove on with a vicious swish of his wand and bundled Harry towards it. Shock
from Snape’s assault was slowly setting in. Harry’d gone chalky white and his teeth were starting to chatter.

He glanced at the two Weasleys. He had no idea why they’d suddenly swung into action on his side. He liked them personally and occasionally had fantasies of hexing Molly Weasley silent on Charlie’s behalf (yes Sirius’ mother had been worse but she wasn’t running around claiming to love him at the same time. Say what you like about his mother, she was at least consistent) but there was no reason for the two boys to support him. Now they looked concerned but uncertain.

“Careful with him,” said Charlie quietly. “Warming him up is good but don’t let him too near the stove, he might not notice if it burns him.”

Harry’s fingers were scrabbling over the sleeve of his sweater but seemed unable to latch on. Sirius was going to – no, Harry was right, murder was too good for Snape.

“Come here,” he said, “I’m right here. Charlie can you make us some hot chocolate? There’s chocolate powder in the larder on the right.”

“Sure,” Charlie fetched the chocolate powder. Bill, looking grateful for something to do, grabbed a carton of milk from a fridge.

“The saucepans are over there’s a small one on the left.”

Charlie had an extremely patient look on his face, the saucepans were very obvious. Sirius figured he was saying impolite things in his head but he didn’t care because Harry definitely twitched at the word saucepan and again at the soft clang as Charlie set it on the stove and picked up the milk.

“No,” said Sirius.

Charlie paused.

“No. You don’t put the chocolate powder in first. No.” In his arms Harry twitched again and his head tilted to listen.

Charlie, still paused, looked down at the milk carton in his hand from which he was about to pour milk into the saucepan. Slowly, watching Sirius, he tilted the carton.

Sirius glowered ferociously, “No.”

Charlie stopped again.

“You put milk in first not the hot chocolate powder, even I know that.”

Watching Sirius like he was about to turn into a dragon and eat them all, Charlie cautiously put the milk down and picked up the hot chocolate powder. Sirius nodded approval.

“Honestly, you don’t put the powder in the first. Harry, that’s right isn’t it, back me up here. Milk then hot chocolate powder. Harry?”

Directly addressed, Harry blinked back into himself, “Of course you put the milk in first. It has to be heated,” he turned and saw Charlie with the betraying packet of chocolate tilted against the lip of saucepan. “What are you doing?” he yelped, utterly scandalized.

He jumped to his feet and hurried over, hip-checking Charlie away and grabbing the chocolate powder as he did so.
“This is awful, does nobody teach you poor wizards anything. You need to heat the milk first.” He poured the milk into the saucepan, eyed it, and then added another slosh.

Sirius did his best to hide his smile as Harry earnestly lectured Charlie on how to make hot chocolate. Charlie, bless him, was nodding along and adding encouraging um-hmmms as Harry diverted into considering cinnamon or nutmeg, but never ever marshmallows. They were strictly verboten. Sirius now kinda of wanted to try one to see what they were like, and if Harry would scold him with that solemn disapproval because it was delightful. (And maybe he now understood James’ habit of making outrageous claims to Lily just to grin stupidly as she frowned sternly)

Harry’s hands grew perceptibly steadier as they went through the familiar motions of stirring the powder into the milk. When he finally removed the pan from the heat, his colour had recovered and his smile was real.

“All done. Now we need some mugs.”

Unfortunately that was too much for the Hogwarts house elves to withstand and two appeared with a sudden pop.

Harry snapped out of that slowly regained calm, spun on the balls of feet and was suddenly between Sirius and the house elves, wand aimed straight at them. Sirius carefully didn’t touch him.

“Harry it’s okay, they’re just house elves, like brownies. They work in the castle but are apparently incapable of following simple instructions.” He glared at the elves.

“But Lordly Black, he is wanting mugs.”

“Yes, and Harry is perfectly capable of finding them on his own.”

“Sorry Lordly Black.” The little creature wrung his flapping ears.

“Stop that at once,” Sirius ordered. “You are not to hurt yourselves.” Then he sighed and rubbed his face because dealing with house elves exhausted him. “My instructions are that you should always leave me be. Why is it so hard for you to follow them?” Harry had been very nearly relaxed and was now back on high alert.

“Sorry Lordly Black, we will fetch you mugs and more chocolate with cream.”

Harry looked down at his pan of chocolate milk and drooped.

“No,” said Sirius firmly before Harry felt obliged to agree. “Harry made me chocolate milk and that’s what I want to drink. It’s too sickly made with cream anyway.”

“But we can –” the elf began.

“No. We are fine. We can find mugs on our own. We will leave the kitchen tidy, so please leave us be. I have told you before not to bother me and James when we’re here.”

“But you brought guests.” He waved his hands to indicate the guests, stretching his arms so high ad wide he would have fallen over if his fellow hadn’t propped him up. They both looked up at him with big anxious eyes and Sirius felt simultaneously brutal and aggravated at being made to feel brutal. He was happy to leave house elves to do their own thing, why couldn’t they leave him alone. He smiled as best he could,

“Please leave us alone. Thank you.”
They blinked at him mournfully but popped away. He shuddered with relief, drew his wand and rapidly put up the quick and dirty house elf wards he and Lily had created together after he got drunk one night and spilled the full story of why house elves made his skin crawl.

The wards wouldn’t actually stop a house elf popping in but they would alert him to the encroaching magic if an elf did. They also stopped them from listening in without Sirius knowing about it.

“It’s unfair because they only wanted to help, and it is their kitchen, but I can’t help think they’re creepy,” said Harry. Distractedly he opened a couple of cupboards and found the mugs.

“So very, very creepy,” agreed Sirius.

“I thought all you purebloods loved house elves,” said Bill. “The Prewetts had two. Mum used to talk about missing them and all the extra work they could do.”

Sirius scowled,

“Harry’s right, it’s unfair because they’re exactly how wizards made them but I can’t bring myself to like them. They’re not trustworthy even when they want to be.” He bit down on the rest of his diatribe. James told him he got a bit creepy about house elves himself.

“Sirius?” Harry took his hand looking so concerned for him that Sirius couldn’t stand it.

“The Blacks had three house elves when I still lived there. Hoppit, he went mad eventually. Beat his head against the wall til he beat his brains out. My mother incendioed the body and continued with her breakfast. Lemby, I thought… anyway I told her to keep quiet about some things and she reported them to my mother instead. When I recovered enough to come downstairs Lemby’s head was on the wall for services to the Black family. Kreacher, somehow he was still going when I inherited, I gave him to Malfoy. It was the best I could do and he was happy to go to Miss Cissa. And hey, since he was a Black elf first he’ll be more loyal to Cissy than that blond wanker, which she might find handy at some point.” There done, hopefully he’d never have to speak about house elves again.

Bill clicked his tongue. “Sometimes I have no idea how the Black family lasted as long as they did.”

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. “Too mean to die.”

Harry shoved a mug of hot chocolate into his hand and climbed onto his lap.

“You are not mean,” he said firmly.

“Ah Harry.” He had no idea what he had done to deserve Harry. He kissed Harry’s pale forehead and ran his hand over the tense back. Harry still hadn’t recovered the ease he’d lost when the house elves appeared. Sirius was annoyed all over again. He eyed Harry and his twitching fingers. Stretching casually he said,

“The dinner you made was great but I think I must have been too distracted by the meeting to eat enough. I’m starving now. Would you mind frying me a couple of eggs or something? I’d do it myself but the eggs always stick to the pan and turn into egg scrapes which isn’t quite the same.”

“That’s because wizards are too trapped in the past to use non-stick. It’s horrifying. And we can do better than fried eggs. Do you like tortillas?”
Sirius would like anything that took the shadows out of Harry’s eyes, he nodded. Harry bounced to his feet, then suddenly turned back, suspicious,

“Do you know what a tortilla is?”

“I’m guessing eggs come into somewhere?”

“You’re hopeless,” said Harry, ruining the scold by picking up his hand and kissing it. “They’re like omelettes for hungry people.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“You know what an omelette is, right?”

“Yes Harry, I know what an omelette is. We had a French wizard chef when I was younger, until they couldn’t afford one any longer and mother had to fall back on the house elves because she couldn’t bear to employ a squib, squibs cost less because they’re haven’t many options. Of course being a squib working for my family, they’d have needed to ask for so much danger money employing a wizard would probably have been cheaper after all.”

“How can you not know what ratatouille is then?”

“I think that must be muggle. Wizard French cooking is all about taking as long as possible to make food as uneatable as possible. Fortunately it’s always served in really tiny portions.”

Bill laughed, “Please repeat that to Fleur where I can see her face.”

“Sorry,” Sirius said, he hadn’t meant to insult anyone directly.

“No, it’s all true as far as I’m concerned. When Fleur introduced me to her family, they invited me to dinner. I thought that would be a nice way to meet the family.”

Sirius choked, trying not to laugh, “She’s a Delacour, right?”

“Right.”

“What?” asked Charlie, tugging at his brother’s sleeve.

“Your brother,” Sirius had to stop to laugh, “your brother has caught the eye of Jean Delacour’s daughter. The Delacours have always been one of the most important French families, and Jean Delacour managed to convince a half-Veela to marry him. Veela don’t marry.”

“They don’t?”

“No. It’s said if you can catch one and hold her through three transformations you can force her to marry you, but I don’t think that’s ever worked out well for anyone involved. Half-veela usually follow their mothers and cast aside their humanity to become full Veela. Delacour convinced one to marry him instead, and convinced her mother to allow it. It’s hardly surprising he’s risen so high in the French Ministry.”

“You are not making me feel any better,” grumped Bill.

“I’m not trying to. Now tell us all about your nice family dinner.”

Bill glared daggers.
“Bill?” Charlie coaxed.

Bill broke off glaring at him to glare at his brother. “Do not say one word of this to Mum. She’s already impossible about Fleur.”

“Not a word, I wouldn’t.”

“Oh I know that.” He ruffled his hand through Charlie’s hair. “But you know what Mum’s like.”

“Yeah.”

“So go on,” Sirius prompted. “How many people were at this dinner?”

“A hundred and fifty, easy.”

“That was a family dinner?” Charlie stared.

“No, the Delacours throw a dinner party once a month and invite important people, connected people. Politicians, diplomats, lords, people like that.”

“And stray curse-breakers,” said Sirius.

Bill finally gave in and laughed at himself, “And stray curse-breakers. I did wonder why Fleur was so insistent about having my dress robes spruced by for the occasion.”

“She didn’t tell you?” Charlie looked ready to take offence on his brother’s behalf.

“It didn’t occur to her. Apparently everybody knows about the Delacour dinners. They sat me at the bottom table next to her little sister. No, no, that was them being nice, I’ve no idea what I’ve had said to anyone else. Gabrielle was adorable and knew which bit of cutlery to use and which wine glass was appropriate. The dinner went on for hours, and the food, the food was more like a series of enchanted pictures than actual food. Fleur forgot to warn me everyone else eats before they go out.”

“That’s French wizard cooking for you, they do good steaks but anything else is impossible,” agreed Sirius. “I think you lose a point if anyone can actually eat any of it.”

“Even stuff that should have tasted good, there was a soufflé, basically a really fluffed up omelette, but it was all rubbery.”

“To serve a hundred and fifty people a soufflé at roughly the same time, you need to use a holding or preserving charm, and most of them aren’t that good. According to my grandmother there was a chef who could do it but he refused to share the secret of his charm work with anyone and it died with him. Cissy would kill to find someone who could pull it off.”

“Huh,” Bill looked thoughtful. “Is that the sort of thing likely to impress the Delacours? The Egyptian knew a frightening number of preserving charms.”

“It would be a good way to win over the mother-in-law at least. If she could find a bride with a suitable charm as her dowry, Cissy would probably already have Draco married.”

“Alright then. Project Soufflé it is.”

“Keep in mind chefs have been trying for years without much success,” Sirius warned.

“If someone’s done it before, then there’s answer,” said Charlie. “And if there’s an answer, Bill can
figure it out.” He looked convinced his older brother could walk on water if it happened to take his fancy. Bill thumped him on the shoulder in appreciation, and Charlie thumped him back.

Sirius sipped his hot chocolate and snuck another glance at Harry. He’d already chopped up the potatoes – the cuts growing quicker and neater as the habitual movements soothed him – and set them to frying and was now working his way through the onions. Sirius watched the clever deft movement of his hands, they looked startling naked without the gloves, and daydreamed a little.

Harry’s hands slowed then stopped. He turned and pointed the knife at Sirius,

“You were managing me! Not even wizards can muck up hot chocolate.”

Sirius shrugged helplessly, “Guilty as charged.”

“You made poor Charlie look like an idiot.”

Charlie quickly raised both hands, disclaiming.

“Poor Charlie indeed, you should have seen the looks he was giving me.”

“I’m not surprised.” Harry turned to Charlie, “I’m very sorry my boyfriend is an idiot.”

“It’s fine.”

“You’re supposed to say I’m not an idiot,” Sirius muttered.

Charlie raised his eyebrows at him.

Harry laughed. “You don’t need to manage me,” he told Sirius.

“Harry love, please don’t ask me to watch you be unhappy when there’s something I can do about it. And if I get hot chocolate out of the deal, bonus.”

“So it’s all pure selfishness on your part.”

“Exactly.”

“Well you’ll get your comeuppance. I’m going to make you eat food that’s actually good for you. Just because magic lets you eat like an 18th century aristocrat without killing yourselves doesn’t mean you should. I’m tempted to dose you all with lemon juice to stop you getting scurvy.”

“No, don’t worry, the Limeny Potion fixes that right up. They add it to the milk.”

“Oh my god, you honestly take potions to stop you getting scurvy?”

“Scurvy’s nothing to mess with,” said Bill. “It’s common on expeditions. We had to take to brewing the Limeny potion in camp.”

“And the idea of eating fresh vegetables was too what, sensible or something?”

“Alley cat?” Sirius still wasn’t quite sure what the matter was. “You don’t have to worry about scurvy. I guess it’s probably still a serious thing in the muggle world but wizards have been safe from it since they invented Limeny back in 17-something.”

Harry dropped the knife on the chopping board and flung both arms around Sirius, “You are ridiculous,” he whispered, “but also amazing.”
Sirius hugged him back, unsure what had provoked the affection but very happy to receive it.

Too soon Harry pulled away and with a sigh went back to chopping. “Do none of the muggle-born say anything about scurvy, or the half-bloods. Somebody must have?”

“I don’t think so. Bill? Charlie?”

“There was a muggle-born who claimed you don’t need Limeny potion,” said Bill. “I thought maybe muggle-borns were resistant to scurvy, they never seem to catch dragon pox, but Shawn got sick just the same on the expedition. He kept eating oranges like a crazy person but he didn’t get any better. We had to send him back to Cairo in the end.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Harry. “Where was he getting the oranges from? Wait you had them under preserving charms, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” said Bill. “Shawn insisted on extra oranges actually. Not that they did him any good.”

“Because the preserving charm can’t actually preserve the vitamin C, not long term. Oh my god, how are you not all dead.”

“Harry?”

“No, don’t fret. It’s definitely in the worry about it later pile. You are going to eat better from now on though.” He pointed with the knife gain.

Sirius sniffed at the promising smell of frying potatoes. “No objections here.”

“Good.” Harry yanked the larder door open as if it had offended him. “The shelves are a mess of preserving charms. I’m amazed the tomatoes haven’t started mutating.” He set a dish of tomatoes down on the counter with a thump. “Talk about something else quick before I complain all night.”

“Uh,” said Sirius, caught by surprise, and also concern. He wouldn’t mind if Harry did talk all night if only he could understand what had upset him.

“Ask Bill about the time the desert ate him,” said Charlie.

“For the last time, the desert did not eat me.”

Sirius listened to them squabble happily and watched Harry settle as he cooked until he placed plates of tortilla and fried tomatoes in front of them beaming. Tortillas turned out to be even better than ratatouille. Sirius liked eggs, potatoes and onions but would not have guessed they’d taste so good put together.

“This is amazing,” he said, as Bill and Charlie nodded appreciatively. “But aren’t you eating with us?”

“I’m making some more. In case anyone wants seconds.”

Sirius watched him for a moment. Tortillas were obviously limited by the size of the frying pan, but Harry hadn’t had to fuss over it that much, he could clearly have had two or three on the go at the same time. Sirius had intentionally provoked Harry into cooking because his fidgety fingers were more at ease when he was doing something with hands, and it seemed Harry had chosen the same cure.

“Harry love?”
“Yes Sirius.”

“What’s worrying you?”

“Nothing’s worrying me.” That swing of the knife thudded home inelegantly. Harry shifted the chunk of potato but his steady rhythm faltered, the knife wavering before it sliced.

“Are you still upset about the scurvy thing?”

“No, well a bit, but – I mean yes, yes, I’m still –”

“I’d rather you told to quit being so fucking nosy than lie to me.”

The knife wobbled and Harry thankfully laid it aside before he caught his fingers. He looked up at the ceiling,

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?” Sirius asked, confused. Harry had just presented him with delicious food, what on earth did he have to be sorry for.

“For, you know.”

“I very much don’t.” He glanced at Bill and Charlie who were doing their best to turn invisible. “Uh, will you guys excuse us if I put up a privacy ward?”

“Please do,” said Bill looking relieved. “I’m sure, as impossible as it seems, there’s something Charlie hasn’t told me yet about his dragons.” He jumped then, and Sirius was pretty sure Charlie had kicked him under the table.

He pushed away from the table and walked the couple of steps to the counter-top. Harry had picked the knife back up, chopping the poor potato into even finer pieces. Sirius flicked his wand and cast an anti-eavesdropping spell.

“Harry, what is the matter?”

“I’m sorry about Snape.”

“You haven’t anything to be sorry for. I’m sorry I brought you here and let him assault you like that.”

At least that got Harry to look at him, though his hands kept massacring the potato.

“It’s not your fault, Sirius, I, I shamed you in front of everybody.”

“You didn’t. Snape’s the one who’s shamed, him and Dumbledore both.”

Harry sighed, “You’re very kind but I wish you wouldn’t be. Snape was in my head, I know how thrilled he was with what he discovered, that he and Lucius had me first –”

“I think I’m insulted that you just said I was like Snape.”

“What? No. You are nothing like Snape.” Harry whirled to face him, knife still in hand. Carefully Sirius reached out and rest his hand against Harry’s wrist. When there was no reaction he slowly moved his hand up until he could take hold of the knife and pull it gently from Harry’s hand. He placed it safely back on the counter.
“Thank you,” he said then, “I was beginning to worry, what with you using Snape’s opinion to judge how I feel.”

“But –”

“But nothing. I’m not upset you had sex with someone before me, just as I hope you’re not upset I’ve had sex with someone before you?” He waited until Harry shook his head. “I am not happy you didn’t want it, or enjoy it.”

“Actually Lucius was a decent shag.”

Alright Sirius was not quite as okay with all this as he was trying to portray because he had to bite down sharply on his first reaction to that. It had to be Lucius too, who was his parents perfect son-in-law, the man his parents had wanted him to be. Who actually played politics. Sirius smacked himself mentally, this was not about him, it was not time to spiral into his own head.

“Good,” he said now he had wrestled his worse self into submission. “But I’d rather not have any more details than that.” He was happy things had gone better for Harry, not wanting details didn’t make him a bad person, did it.

“What?” Harry finally looked at him properly. Sirius devoutly hoped he did not look as jealously possessive as he felt.

“It’s generally not considered the done thing to compare an ex-lover to your current lover.” He couldn’t quite believe he had to point that out. Harry was too honest for anyone’s good.

“Compare?” asked Harry. Then he laughed, “I wasn’t comparing. Merlin I said he was decent. There’s no comparison. It’s like comparing, comparing cricket and quidditch.”

“Sex with Malfoy is like cricket?” That was different. Sirius had gone to a couple of cricket matches to support Lily’s brother-in-law in an attempt at family togetherness that was soon abandoned. Mostly the cricket people had run around doing incomprehensible things while Sirius ate a picnic.

“Long periods of boredom with occasional, brief excitement.”

Sirius laughed with relief, “Okay, you can make those sorts of comparisons. And I’m like quidditch?” He was not above fishing for compliments. And the good thing about Harry was that while he might be painfully honest, he wouldn’t placate with soft words that didn’t mean anything.

“No not like quidditch. Being with you is like flying, when you go so high and fast you can barely breathe and it’s wonderful.”

Though that was the problem with painful honesty, it was painful.

“Harry,” Sirius pulled him close and Harry squeaked with surprise, but when Sirius went to let go, Harry snuggled in close.

“When did you go flying anyway?” he asked in the absence of having anything coherent to say.

“If anything would convince me to join the death eaters, it would be flying.”

“Yeah?” Sirius noticed Harry had completely avoided the question, because Harry was honest and would avoid lying if he could. He had no interest in forcing Harry to lie. He’d like to know Harry’s secrets but whatever happened with you-know-who and his death eaters, didn’t feel like an
important secret, not really. He’d understand if Harry felt ashamed for almost falling for you-know-who’s blandishments after Snape or Malfoy (thinking about it, Sirius was certain it would have been Malfoy, Snape wasn’t interested in people enough to notice Harry’s power, but Malfoy would have been right on that) brought Harry to his attention. But Harry shouldn’t feel bad; people with far more reason than him to be wary had fallen for Riddle’s pitch.

Harry had got the hell out of there that was all that mattered to Sirius. Now that Uncle and Aunt he was so careful not to name, they seemed important.

“Flying is amazing,” Sirius agreed. “I’ll borrow you a broom and take you up.”

“Really?” Harry’s eyes lit up.

“Really. And you listen to me. No matter what Snape claims, or how much trouble he tries to stir up, the only thing I care about when it comes to him and Malfoy is that you didn’t want it.”

“I agreed.”

“Agreement has nothing to do with wanting. Tell me honestly that you wouldn’t rather have spent the afternoon making flapjacks?”

That seemed to stump Harry for a moment. “But it doesn’t matter what you want, there’s just what you have to do.”

“Right,” Sirius’ hands clenched into fists and for a moment an awful weakness stole over him. He wanted to collapse against Harry and let his alley cat hold him up. “But sometimes, sometimes you can make a little space for yourself and have something, someone you want. You can.” He winced because that was less conviction and more begging.

“Of course you can,” said Harry. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have let Snape get to me.”

“Don’t worry about it he does it to everyone.”

“No I shouldn’t have let me make doubt you. I am going to make a space safe for us. I swear.”

“Yeah.” Sirius leaned a bit against Harry.

“Yeah. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Bill kicked Charlie under the table.

“Stop watching them, you’re being a creep.”

“Sorry.” Charlie ducked his head away but snuck one last look. Bill kicked him again,

“You can’t possibly be that gone on him already.”

“I’m not, it’s not Harry ¬¬”

Bill pulled a face, because did Charlie think he was a moron.

“Oh fine, if he was unattached I’d definitely ask him out, because he is lovely. But it isn’t that. It’s just nice.”
“Nice?”

“Nice to see them together. I never thought I could have that. I’m, it’s deviancy –”

Bill had always disliked that term but he was rapidly staring to hate it. He wished he could scream at his mother loud enough for her to hear through her suddenly cloth ears.

“– and deviancy, it’s dark corners and keeping hidden and never staying the night. It’s not that.”

He jerked his head towards Black and Harry.

Bill risked a glimpse. They weren’t doing anything really, certainly nothing that could be called deviant, but they were so obviously in love it might as well have been written on them.

“I want that,” Charlie confessed, studying the table top intently. “Not with Harry particularly, but I want that.”

Getting up, Bill walked around the table so he could drag Charlie into a proper hug.

“That’s it,” he said, “you’re not crashing with that idiot any longer, it’s obviously not good for you if you’re getting maudlin. You’re moving in with me and Fleur. The box room is ridiculously tiny but we should be able to expand it easy enough.”

“I can’t,” said Charlie without disguising in any way his desire to do exactly that.

“Okay,” he felt Charlie flinch with betrayal. “You go back to that place tonight and I’ll kidnap you tomorrow morning.”

“What?”

“You’re a complete slug-a-bed. If I get there before nine you haven’t hope of noticing you’re being kidnapped.”

“This conversation has stopped making sense.”

“That’s not my fault. Are you going to be reasonable?”

“Okay fine. I’ll move in with you.”

“See was that so hard.”

Charlie punched him, ungrateful little so-an-so.

Harry was furious with himself. He’d let Snape get into his head and mess him up again. He was such a fool. But Sirius had been there and hadn’t let him fall for it. Sirius understood the difference between what you wanted and what you had to do. (This did not improve Harry’s temper any, Sirius wasn’t supposed to have that struggle. Still Harry was here now, Sirius wasn’t going to do anything he didn’t want to ever again.)

Sirius wanted him. The proof was right in front of him. He looked down at the gloves he taken off to cook, and pulled them back on, taking his time to enjoy the flex of leather against his skin. Sirius kissed his cheek and wrapped his hand around Harry’s.

“We’re in this together,” said Sirius quietly.
“Always,” Harry promised.

Flicking his wand, Sirius released the privacy bubble. Bill and Charlie were arguing about whose fault it was they had detention ten years ago, which surprised Harry because he’d never imagined that Bill ever got detention.

Sirius laughed, “You’re not still arguing about that, are you?”

Harry giggled as two affronted glares turned their way and both Bill and Charlie started explaining how it was so very much not their fault.

“You realize McGonagall wanted to give you another detention for fighting.”

“Fighting?” asked Bill. “Fighting who?”

“Each other.”

“We weren’t fighting,” he said indignantly.

“We were discussing,” said Charlie, “it’s not the same thing at all.”

“Whatever you say boys.”

They both muttered about foolish teachers who didn’t understand anything.

“I think McGonagall will throw a party when she gets the last Weasley out of Gryffindor.”

“We are not that bad.”

“You keep thinking that.”

Bill and Charlie looked they’d happily discuss all night but Harry had some boasting to do.

“Hey,” he said, “did you see the gloves I’m wearing. Sirius gave them to me.” They didn’t seem understand, so Harry joyfully explained how brilliant it was all over again. They were starting to look appropriately impressed, when there was a clatter of footsteps and the kitchen door swung open. Harry tensed, but it was James who danced into the room.

“Who’s the man,” he declaimed.

“Sirius,” said Harry promptly.

James grinned at him, then pulled his face into stern lines, “I will let that go because you two are ridiculous –”

“More ridiculous than asking, who’s the man?” Harry could feel Sirius’ body shake against his back as he tried to pretend he wasn’t laughing.

“You’re lucky I’m in such of a good mood, so I’m going to leave you to your delusions,” said James. “Because I am going to speak to Amelia Bones tomorrow with Dumbledore’s full, if incredibly distracted, approval. Go me. Go us.”

He held his fist up to Harry. Harry wondered where on earth he’d picked up the gesture but he fist-bumped him back.

“Please excuse James,” said Sirius. “He always goes a little moon-mad when his plotting comes
Harry was the perfect distraction. Though I can’t believe they… that Snape… Is everything okay?"

Sirius looked at Harry.

“It’s fine,” said Harry.

“Because I can call him out if you want me to?”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “He’s not that important.”

James tilted his head at Sirius.

“No, I’m with Harry, why give him an importance he doesn’t deserve.”

“Alright then. Back to celebrating my genius.”

“Is he always this unbearable?” Harry asked Sirius in a deliberately loud whisper.

“Hey!”

“Pretty much,” said Sirius.

“Well in that case,” Harry grabbed James’ plate of food from the warmer. “This should shut you up for the moment.”

“Oooh food. Where did this come from?”

“Harry cooked,” said Sirius proudly.

“Yeah.” James took a bite. “Wow, this great. Sirius, well done on pulling someone who can cook.”

“It was on the list,” said Sirius, ruining the dead-pan by smiling at Harry and kissing the tip of his nose.

Bill laughed and then stopped when they all turned to look at him

“Sorry, I was just imagining the list: cooking, insulting Snape. What else could be on there?”

“Able to put up with crazy best friends who’re plotting to take over the world,” said Sirius.

“I knew there was a plan,” exulted Charlie. “We want to help.”

“Huh.”

“Charlie!” Bill scolded. “We’re supposed to work up to that.”

“Why? We’ll only sound weird and suspicious.”

“Fine.” Bill straightened his shoulders. “As my lacking any tact at all brother has just jumped straight in; we know there’s a plan, we want to help.”

“Ah,” said Sirius.

“If you say one word about our mother, I will hex you. I’m twenty-four, and Charlie’s twenty-two.
We’re old enough. We’ve been death eater targets since we were born. It’s time to make those bastards regret it.”

Sirius and James exchanged a long, speaking glance.

“You’re already helping,” said James finally. “You joined the Order.”

“Who are as much use as a thread-bare blanket. I have plans for my life that do not involve living in hiding. You’re working to take the fight to you-know-who. Let us help.”

Sirius clutched Harry tight. James’ whole face shadowed for a second and Harry suddenly understood why people sometimes called him scary.


“And Fleur,” said Bill. “I talked to her. She agreed.”

“And Fleur. But not your parents, I’m sorry but –”

Bill cut in, “We get it.”

“And not Percy. I’m sorry but he’s in deep with the Ministry. He’d hand you over without realizing he was doing it.”

“I understand.”

“And not Dumbledore. I know he’s the Headmaster but his conviction Neville must fulfil the prophecy leaves him, uh, unresponsive to other matters.”

Harry grinned to himself. James sounded as mad about that he was.

“I have noticed,” said Bill. “I don’t disagree with you. As long as our family isn’t in danger we won’t say anything to anyone in the Order, no matter who. Right Charlie.”

“Agreed,” said Charlie with a slow nod.

“Okay then. We need to repair our relationship with the Ministry. The Order has enough power that even with its inertia it’s causing problems. Frank’s been our liaison with the Ministry for years but his paranoia about Neville –”

“Which is isn’t completely unreasonable,” Sirius added.

“– means he’s been difficult to work with. But we haven’t been able to do anything.”

Sirius unlooped himself from Harry and stepped forward, “Until now. James, because he is the man –”

James bowed in his chair.

“– has convinced Dumbledore he should speak to Bones on behalf the order.”

“And after a shovel full or two of apologies hopefully we can move forward,” finished James.

“What we need to do is flush out the death eaters from the Aurors,” explained Sirius. “We won’t get anywhere while they’re leaking secrets like a sieve.”
“It’s not like they don’t know who most of them are.” James sighed. “The most obvious offenders are Rookwood, MacNair, and Avery and there are maybe half-a-dozen others.”

“So we’re going to set up a sting. The first thing we’re going to do is ward all the muggle-borns muggle homes.”

“Wait,” said Bill, “you’ve been arguing for that since I joined the Order –”

“Since before you joined the Order,” muttered Sirius.

“– but if the Ministry is full of death eaters.”

“It will get out,” said James. “Exactly.”

Sirius nodded, “We can use that. We’ll ward a dozen empty houses, and tell different people about different houses. Then wait and see which ones get burned down and dark-marked.”

“Clever,” said Bill.

“I’m glad you think so.”

“I’ll go to Bones with the plan tomorrow. Bill, you come with me. Charlie, you and Fleur can start looking for empty houses.”

“I can help with that,” said Harry.

Sirius winced, “Sorry alley cat, but if you know anything, they’ll say it was you who told.”

“Oh.” Harry tried not to let his hurt show. It wasn’t Sirius’ fault.

James dropped a hand on each of their shoulders, “The same applies to you Pads. I can already hear Moody.”

“Oh.” Harry’s hurt fell away to leave only fierce anger. How dare they think that of Sirius.

“I’m sorry,” said James.

“It’s alright,” said Sirius. He did not sound alright. Harry tucked himself around Sirius and held on.

“I can still show Fleur and Charlie how to deal with Estate Agents,” said Harry. “I can leave before they get any addresses.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” said Sirius.

“I don’t care. No I really don’t. I care what everyone in this room thinks and Rosmerta but I’m not bothered about anybody else.” Harry only marginally cared what anyone other than Sirius thought but it didn’t seem very polite to say that. And he did care what James thought because if James thought he was a death eater he’d try and get Sirius away from him and that would upset Sirius. So it was at least mostly true.

“So we have a plan,” said James. “Everyone agreed?”

A round of nods.

“Good. Bill, I’ll meet you tomorrow at the Ministry at quarter to ten. Charlie you can stop by the Three Broomsticks and speak to Harry. Sirius –”
“Yeah, yeah, I’m on it,” said Sirius. He sounded better but his body was still stiff and unhappy. “Come on alley cat, we should go, we want to be back before midnight.”

“Sorry,” said James. “There’s one last thing.”

“I thought we could do that when Harry wasn’t here.”

“It’s like you want your boyfriend to kill me.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry demanded.

“We’re talking about the fact the Order is all of a twitter. They don’t like what Snape did but they can’t admit it was wrong. They don’t like being made to think, and they don’t like moral dilemmas, so somehow this has all become Sirius’ fault.”

“That’s not fair, Sirius didn’t do anything wrong.”

“It’s okay Harry,” Sirius pressed in close. “I was expecting this.”

“So they need their scapegoat to suffer a bit and then they can conveniently brush the whole thing under the rug.”

“Sirius is not suffering anything.” Harry pushed Sirius behind him. He’d fight James on this.

“See,” said James.

“Oh alright,” Sirius agreed grumpily. “It’s okay,” he told Harry, “it doesn’t hurt.”

James groaned, “You definitely want your boyfriend to kill me.” He focused on Harry, “I know Sirius is about as believable as a delirious pooka when he says he’s okay, but it truly doesn’t hurt. I’ll demonstrate on you first if you like.”

Harry took a deep breath and let out some of his anger. He reminded himself it wasn’t really James he was angry with and that he should be reasonable. But no, he still wanted to kill James, now he just wanted to kill most of the Order too.

James smiled coaxingly at him.

“Okay fine, show me whatever it is.”

“Pull up your sleeve,” James told him, as he drew his wand and used it like an over large pen to trace symbols across his hand.

Harry dragged his sleeve up. Sirius didn’t try and stop the demonstration which convinced him more than anything that had been said.

“Alright,” said James, “I’m going to grab your elbow. You step to the right and pull away.”

Begrudgingly Harry did so. James didn’t grab his elbow hard and it was easy to tug himself loose. There was a faint warmth and the brush of James magic, but nothing hurt. When Harry looked down at his arm though, there was a violent purple bruise covering his elbow, so clear you could see the individual finger marks. It looked exactly as if someone had viciously yanked him around. Harry poked the skin with his finger and the lack of pain was disorientating.

“It’s entirely an illusion,” said James. He was conducting a slow motion fight with Sirius, the careful impact of his hand leaving splotchy bruises on Sirius’ arm, wrists and across his cheekbone.
It didn’t matter that Harry had the evidence of his own bruise to know they weren’t real. The homicidal rush of fury forced him to drop his gaze and curl in on himself before he tried to kill James for real.

“And the Order just lets this go on?” demanded Bill. “My father just lets this go on.”

“The Order,” James sighed. “The Order wants to feel it’s effective at something. Bullying one of you-know-who’s victims is apparently all they can manage. I don’t like it—”

Harry looked up quickly at the dark tones in James’ voice. It was enormously reassuring to see James was as angry as he felt. He smiled at James in apology for his earlier thoughts and James smiled back in a slash of white teeth.

“— but we only go this far when they’re truly worked up. It’s better than somebody trying to give Sirius bruises for real. Your father, on the other hand, has spoken to me three or four times about moving on even if you can’t forgive. And he’s had a word with Madam Pomfrey, checked we aren’t trying to hide anything more serious.”

“Well thank Merlin for that,” said Bill. “Charlie and I, we knew you weren’t fighting when we were at Hogwarts but we thought that was a show for those reporting to the death eaters. I thought at least Dumbledore realized it wasn’t true. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m sorry.”

“Bill, you were a Hogwarts student,” said Sirius. “You were mostly thinking, yikes that homework needs to be done, and, I wonder if Madeline Alcroft fancies me. You were a child, you weren’t thinking about adults at all. The majority of the students think we step out of a cupboard every morning at eight to take classes and step right back in when classes stop.”

Charlie laughed and Bill said, “I’m not convinced but I can’t argue with you with that bruise on your face.”

Sirius hugged Harry, “James is terrible at it too. I can talk him into practically anything like this.”

“Yes alright,” said James. “Stop spreading secrets and get lost.”

“Anything you say my deer.”

“Double get lost.”

“Come on Harry, we know when we’re not wanted.”

Harry let himself be drawn away. He was still going to destroy people but they weren’t important right now. Not when he could go home with Sirius. He let Sirius rest his head against his shoulder and thought maybe soon he’d be able to say I love you without his throat closing over on the words.

After James left too, Charlie turned to him, “You realize they still didn’t tell us the Plan?”

“I had noticed that,” said Bill. “Nice distraction though. Black looking beaten to hell removed any chance I had to argue, it would have felt too much like picking on someone already down for the count.”

Charlie nodded his agreement. “You reckon they made up the plan with the booby-trapped houses on the spot?”
“Yes I do.” Bill admired the way they’d come up with the idea in no more than a couple of glances. Now that he thought about it, he remembered they’d been Auror partners before, it showed. “I’m still happy to help though, it’s a good plan.”

“But not the Plan.”

“No. You might be right about Black’s Arithmancy being the secret. Potter was awfully quick to separate him into a different team.”

“We can try again once we’ve proved we can keep our mouths shut. Harry has no idea though, does he?”

“I think Harry has his own plan,” admitted Bill. “I think it mostly involves killing people.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake, Harry is not scary.”

“Harry is fucking terrifying. You just don’t notice because you’re a nutter who coos over full-grown dragons.”

Charlie sulked all the way to the apparition point.
Harry followed Sirius along the Hogwarts corridors. They were taking another route out the castle and Sirius was explaining as he went so Harry would have an idea of the layout of the castle. Sirius’ explanations tended to be so involved – apparently the Professors had a points system for how many students they could catch in compromising positions, and no it had not been started by James or Sirius, it had been in place for years, nobody knew who had started it, Sirius suspected his great-great-grandfather but not as a joke, prurience and punishment the two things that made a Black heart beat faster – that if Harry wasn’t already familiar with Hogwarts he would have been hopelessly lost.

They had just passed the portrait of Lord Snooty-Britches (Harry was going to assume that was not his actual name) which was definitely hiding a secret room, Sirius and James had checked the Hogwarts blueprints when they became Professors and they were completely and totally right, take that, they just couldn’t figure out the password, they’d get there in the end though.

“You have weird hobbies,” said Harry.

“We have to do something when we’re stuck at Hogwarts.”

“I’m sure we could find something more interesting to do.”

“Well we could, but not at Hogwarts. It’s not safe, and not just because of the Professors and their point system. See, this small side room is the link up point for all three main corridors which means it’s the perfect place to ambush somebody. And look what we have here, my absolute favourite part of Hogwarts, the people.”

Moody, Shacklebolt, and Tonks stepped out of conjured shadows at the end of the room. Harry tensed.

“It’s okay,” said Sirius. “Their opinion of themselves is too high to give someone an actual kicking.”

Moody laughed harshly, “Seems like Potter beat us to it.”

Sirius lifted one hand to his bruised cheek and then ducked his head away. Harry could tell his focus was still fixed on the three in front of him. He reached blindly behind him and wrapped his arm around Harry, pulling him in close so he was tucked safely in against Sirius’ back.

Moody laughed again.

Harry bent his head and pressed his face into Sirius’ sweater to the betraying flash of his eyes. He was certain they were glowing Avada Kedvra green.

He was so angry he wanted to splatter their blood across the walls and their limbs over the floor. So he held tighter to Sirius and tried to hold onto his temper. That other universe had taught him, slowly, painfully, that he could not fight the whole wizarding world. Not all at once anyway. As mad as those bruises on Sirius made him, they were protection. James had created an equilibrium that kept Sirius safe and Harry couldn’t disrupt that without consequences. Just his presence had been enough to earn Sirius a beating, fake though it might be. If Harry did anything the Order could call suspicious it would be Sirius who paid for it.
Of course if they didn’t know it was Harry… He grinned against Sirius’ shoulder. He was going have to do some serious planning. But that for later, right now he just had to hang on to his temper and not make any more trouble for Sirius.

“We wanted to make sure there no misunderstandings,” said Shacklebolt. “We don’t like you –”

“I was hardly going to misunderstand that,” said Sirius.

“– and we’re keeping our eye on you. In my opinion you’re a disgrace to the service and to the Order. You should have been sent on your way years ago. But Dumbledore likes to give second chances, and somehow you talked Potter out of killing you for the moment, so here we are. But never forget you’re on borrowed time.”

“Threat-complaint-threat, complaint-threat-complaint” said Sirius. “Could you hurry it up, Harry and I have plans that don’t include listening to you repeating yourself all night.”

“Harry. And where did your little muggle-born friend come from so opportunely. And you invited him right in, no caution, no thought in your head that he could be one of you-know-who’s agents?”

Sirius laughed, “Really, you’re going to try that.”

“He’s had contact, intimate contact, with two of you-know-who’s men.”

“And you lot keep telling me Snape is Dumbledore’s man.”

“Don’t split hairs.”

“Hair? It’s hardly a hair, it’s a goddamn log.”

Moody chuckled, “You always could argue better than a lawyer. The fact is Black, I don’t trust you. I know we’ve never got the straight story out of you about what happened that night.”

Sirius had pokered up all stiff and unhappy the way he hadn’t been when Shacklebolt had been picking at him. Harry lifted his head and glared at Moody.

“And now you show up with a pretty little muggle on your arm –”

“Moody thinks I’m pretty,” said Harry, “I think that’s most disturbing thing I’ve heard all day.”

“Smart-mouthed too,” said Moody. “You need to watch that.”

“Funnily enough,” snapped Sirius, “Jasper Greengrass said much the same thing. I didn’t realize you and he were getting on these days.”

“Don’t push it,” warned Moody.

“Haven’t even started yet. Lay a finger on Harry and we’ll see how much I push it.”

“Now you sound like yourself at least. So you ready to me tell me the truth?”

“We’ve told you the truth, over and over. I’m not doing it again because your paranoia is kicking off.”

“You’re busted flushes the both of you, I don’t know why I waste my time.”

“I have no idea either, feel free to stop.”
“One day you’ll slip up and I’ll be able to drag you in and sweat it out of you.”

“You can try. But for now why don’t you take yourselves off.”

Moody, nearly curdled with frustration, stumped back. Shacklebolt took a step then stopped,

“The kid doesn’t need to stay with you.” He addressed Harry directly, “You want to come with us, we’ll find you somewhere to stay.”

Harry laughed. “You think I’d go with you? I wouldn’t trust you lot to look after a stray cat.”

“Better us than Black.”

“On what possible basis?”

Tonks pushed herself, “You wouldn’t understand because you’re not from the wizarding world but the Black family is –”

“Stop right there,” said Harry. “I know all you wizards seem to be practically insane on the subject, but Sirius is not actually his family. He’s Sirius and Sirius is wonderful and if you’re all too stupid to see that, well, sucks to be you, you’re missing out.” Really what was he supposed to do to them that was worse than that. They could have Sirius as a friend and didn’t. Harry was going to send them all condolence cards.

“You can’t trust Black. Even Potter figured that out. The Black family is warped and treacherous, you can’t trust any of them.”

Sirius pressed his arm against his chest like the words had physically hurt him.

“Give me your handkerchief,” said Harry.

“Huh?” Sirius blinked at him.

“Handkerchief. You’re a well-brought up pureblood, I’m sure you have a clean one in your pocket.”

“Yes, why do you… no matter, here you go.” Sirius handed him a neatly folded handkerchief, crisp and white. Purebloods, so predictable.

Harry shook the handkerchief out three times until it had elongated into a scarf, then handed it over to Tonks. It immediately became a bright vivid purple to contrast nicely with the pale pink of her hair.

“What?” she asked looking down at it in puzzlement.

“It will change to suit whatever role you’re playing. But if you’re on assignment and need a quick change, it will go with whatever colour you say.”

Tonks lifted up the scarf and said wonderingly, “Red.”

The scarf obediently changed colour.

“That’s incredible,” she started to wrap it around her neck.

“Red doesn’t really go with pink,” said Harry. “If you don’t like purple I’d go with green.”
“Stop dishing out fashion advice and explain,” Shacklebolt demanded, drawing his wand. Harry caught Sirius’ hand before he could go for his.

“I feel sorry for her. Tonks could have had Sirius for an Uncle and now she never will. So it’s a pity gift. Hopefully it makes her feel lots better.”

The smile on Tonks’ face died and her fingers fidgeted at the cloth of scarf as if she wanted to strip it away but couldn’t bear to take such an overt action.

Harry smiled meanly. He was sure she’d never quite be able to get rid of a scarf with magic that suited her so well, and he hoped she thought about Sirius every time she saw it. How dare she try and pretend he didn’t exist.

Shacklebolt looked uncomfortable and after a too long moment he said,

“Alright let’s go.”

“Bye-bye,” Harry called, waving to their retreating backs. Moody turned his head and stared at him, his one good eye narrow and intense as his magical eye circled wildly.

“I’m in a committed relationship,” Harry called. “It doesn’t matter how pretty you think I am.”

“Well you’ve front enough for Black, that’s for certain.” Moody stamped away following the other two.

When the hall was quiet again, Sirius turned to Harry,

“That was unkind.”

“Moody shouldn’t dish it out if he can’t take it.”

“I was talking about Nymphandora.”

“She hurt you.”

“No she didn’t.”

Harry reached out and touched Sirius’ chest just at the top of his ribs.

“Oh that,” Sirius rubbed at the spot. “That was just psychosomatic. It’s not even her fault. She has the perfect right to reject her family magic if she wants to.”

Harry focused on the important part, “And that hurts you?”

“I can feel her slipping away. Black magic is possessive it doesn’t like losing her.”

Harry tilted his head because it sounded like Sirius wasn’t saying something.

“And I don’t like losing her either, alright. She dislikes me so much she’s walking away from her mother’s family magic. Not even I hated my mother enough to reject the family magic.”

“I thought you ran away from home.”

“My god, the grapevine is really working overtime down in the village.”

Harry blushed.
“No it’s okay. It was just disconcerting. I did run away from home, and my mother blasted me off her beloved tapestry but that’s not the same thing as losing your family magic. If I had I could never have become Lord Black.”

“So Tonks might lose her magic?”

“Just the Black family magic. She’ll have her own magic, and whatever Tonks magic she inherits for her father, which won’t be much.”

Harry’s confusion must have been obvious because Sirius continued,

“Magic isn’t linear, four people binding their magic together have far more magic than four individuals. It’s how the Founders got the magic together to build Hogwarts. It’s why you-know-who and his death eaters are so strong, although that bond is so hopelessly corrupt it also weakens them at the same time. And family is one of tightest bonds of all.

“That’s the real difference between muggle-borns and purebloods. Muggle-borns, provided they’re truly muggle-born and don’t actually come from a magical family, which happens more often than suits anyone to admit, will only have their magic and the start of a family magic. It’s like a first twig poking out of the ground. A pureblood on the other hand is like a twig on a whole tree. It’s still a twig, but not really the same thing. Nobody likes admitting that either.”

“So muggle-borns are weaker than purebloods?” Harry hoped that wasn’t what Sirius was saying.

“The answers both yes and no. Not at Hogwarts because they only invite muggle-borns with enough personal magic to compensate for the lack of family magic. The average pureblood student will have much less personal magic than a muggle-born, but their family magic makes up for it. The Crabbe boy was almost a squib, but he’s grown into his family magic and now he’s practically respectable. On the other hand there’s a muggle-born witch in Neville’s year who’s ridiculously powerful with just her personal magic, she drives poor Draco round the twist. She’ll add her potential family magic to her husband’s family, strengthening it and gaining access to his family magic in place of her own.”

“Wait no, that’s not fair.” Sirius was talking about Hermione, he had to be, and Hermione would hate that.

“She could marry someone with weaker family magic if she could find them. They’d call it after her husband but it would still be hers. Don’t look at me like that, I don’t make the rules. If you married Daphne Greengrass your potential family magic would be added to the Greengrass family. Fair’s fair.”

“Seems unfair all around.”

“How do you think the great families got so strong in the first place? I told you in the old days all muggle-borns would join a wizarding family, they’d receive the tradition and the protection, the wizarding family would get stronger. Everyone was happy. What is it you muggles say, it was win-win.”

“Don’t wizards do win-win?”

“Nowadays wizards tend to go for lose-lose given the choice. Winning is nowhere near as important as making sure your opponent loses.”

“Wizards make no sense.”
“Oh I agree totally. So yes, the average muggle-borns is weaker than the average purebloods because of the addition of family magic. There are a fair number of what would be muggle-borns who simply aren’t strong enough for Hogwarts without any family magic to give them a boost. They’ll just live out their lives being muggles with exceptionally good luck. When a wizard or witch marries a muggle, they’re usually marrying a weak born-muggle. A true muggle is difficult for a magical person to associate closely with because of their lack of magic, you can’t feel it around them and if you touch them, it’s a bit like they’re dead.”

Harry squirmed because it was difficult dealing with muggles even if he didn’t like to admit it. In a shop, if your fingers brushed against theirs there was a cold lack of reaction. He hadn’t noticed this with Aunt Petunia though, or Dudley. Uncle Vernon when very mad would seem to spark. And oh, that explained some things and was also hilarious, Harry only regretted he couldn’t go and tell them they were magic after all.

“If a born-muggle’s a little bit stronger, they might end up finding their way into a wizarding enclave and if they’re young enough getting an apprenticeship and joining the wizarding world that way. There’s a whole bunch who slide between the boundaries, weak wizards, squibs, and born-muggles. They’ll slowly build up a family magic and eventually they might have a child strong enough for Hogwarts. Though often they won’t go because for some reason a lot of families don’t like the idea of their child being bullied by purebred idiots for seven straight years.”

“Families can be so strange.”

“If the child is strong enough though, they might go for the opportunity of a job in the Ministry. They’re quite accepting there. After all they need somebody has to do the work while the purebred sit around having long lunches.”

“You really don’t like purebloods.” Harry had known Sirius didn’t like his family but he hadn’t realized his dislike was general and intense.

“You-know-who is a symptom not a cause. And so is muggle-born rights. The real fight is between the traditionalists and the call-themselves-progressives.”

“Call-themselves-progressives?”

“They believe the traditionalists shouldn’t have all the power and that it should be shared. With them.”

“Ah.”

“The progressives support rights for muggle-borns because it weakens the traditionalists. The traditionalists support you-know-who because he promised to strengthen them. It’s just unfortunate for them that he turned out to be a murdering psychopath. The progressives want a muggle-born Minister but that will just prove they’re winning. It won’t change anything. We’re only going to get real change when we broaden things out and stop control of the Ministry being fought over by squabbling cabals of Gryffindors and Slytherins still enmeshed in grudges from their school days.”

That last bit sounded rehearsed, Harry squinted at him, “Is that James’ political platform?”

“Will be,” Sirius admitted without shame. “Once we’ve got rid of you-know-who, just give it ten years. James plans for the future. Despite them all being nutters, Potter magic is very steady.”

“And Black magic?”

“Oh we’re the ones screaming our defiance into the dark night. Tad prone to melodrama are the
“Just a tad?” asked Harry raising one eyebrow.

“Teeny-tiny,” said Sirius holding his thumb and finger up close together.

Harry lost the ability to keep a straight face and started laughing, hauling Sirius in for a kiss.

Sirius kissed him back and then said, “None of that now, laughing is absolutely terrible for melodrama.”

“Oh dear, however will I cope.”

“Better,” said Sirius and kissed his cheek.

“My heart is rent in two,” said Harry and placed the back of his hand to his forehead. He tried for a dramatic sigh but only managed a choked huff.

“Much better,” said Sirius and kissed him on the lips. “A bit more screeching insolence and we’ll make a Black of you yet.”

“Screeching is what defines the Blacks?”

“Pretty much. That and yelling. We’re the oldest family in Britain, others claim older but it’s always through marriages and sideways descent. James’ family is ancient if you look at it right. But the Black family magic actually is ancient. And we don’t claim descent from Merlin or the Founders like every fashionable family does, and both if they can get away with it. No, the Blacks are descended from the Lady of the Lake’s daughter and one of Arthur’s knights, Sir Tristam. Tristam means either clatter of swords or sorrowful which makes it the ultimate Black name. The Lady of the Lake’s daughter goes unnamed but she’s described as Dora or Tristam’s gift from Magic herself paid for in blood and sorrow and she was said to be as beautiful as the starlight.”

There were severally idiotically mushy things Harry wanted to say to that. The Blacks’ taste for melodrama was obviously catching. Instead he said,

“You come by your tendency for dramatics honestly then.”

“Actually,” Sirius stopped and looked at Harry, “they say Starlight just appeared one night, stepped out of the woods as bright and beautiful as the stars.”

It took Harry a moment to figure out why that sounded like a question. “Now you’re really being dramatic, and ridiculous.”

“You’re brighter and beautifuller than the stars.” Sirius was very pale and the hand he reached out with didn’t quite touch Harry, as if he wasn’t sure he was allowed to.

Harry laughed, “I am not. I’m as plain as brown bread.”

“Oh Harry.” Sirius kissed him long and lingering and Harry’s toes curled. He leaned his head against Sirius’ chest to recover his breath,

“Have you finished being ridiculous now?” he asked. “That sort of thing happens in legends. And I’m not having any of that nonsense here.”

“No?” asked Sirius, coaxing his head up so he could kiss him again.
“No. Nope. No way. Legends all end terribly. We’re going to be the least legendary people ever.”

“No arguments from me. I’m not really up for blood and sorrow anyway. All sounds terribly uncomfortably.”

“Exactly.”

Thankfully Sirius had stopped looking so spooked. He shook his head, “Of course you’re not. Sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking for a moment. Of course magic wouldn’t, not for me. Maybe James, but obviously no. Sorry, you’re right I was being ridiculous.”

Sirius started to lead the way to the door, then turned back,

“But, you know, if there was something that had to be done to keep you with me, you only need to say, it doesn’t matter what it is.”

“Sirius,” said Harry as patiently as he could, which wasn’t very because there was a sliver of fear coiling down his spine about what his escape to this universe might cost him.

“Just remember that, okay.” And then Sirius was striding away down the corridor so fast Harry had to run to avoid being left behind.

“If you want to keep me with you, you could slow down a bit,” he said tartly once he’d caught up.

“My prosaic alley cat,” Sirius tucked himself in against Harry’s side and Harry wrapped his arm around his shoulders and drew him into a hug. “What would I do without you.”

“Give a ridiculous speech from the top of Astronomy Tower before running away to join the Wizards International Foreign Legion.”

“Hmm, sounding dangerously tempting. Do you have a counter-offer?”

“I could probably think of something,” said Harry, letting his hand slide lower to curve around Sirius’ hip.

“I –”

But Harry lost whatever Sirius said next as he realized the tiny hall in front of the West Door was occupied by two dark shadows. He edged in front of Sirius,

“Who’s there?” he demanded.

The two shadows, one tall and one short, shifted. The short one pushed the tall one forwards,

“Go on Remus,” said Hestia Jones.

Remus, tall and stooped, shuffled nervously up to them. Harry looked up at him. Remus seemed much the same, but his clothes were smarter and his face was no longer hollow with hunger and tiredness.

“Hello Sirius.”

“Remus.”

Remus didn’t say anything else. Sirius tugged on Harry’s hand and started to walk around him to the door.
"Remus," Jones hissed in aggravation. "Ask him how he is."

"You doing okay Sirius?"

"I’m fine. I have, at least, not turned into a ventriloquist’s puppet."

"That’s not fair," said Jones. "Remus just wants to help."

"No, you just want to help, and I do wish you wouldn’t. Remus wants to go home and pull the covers over his head so he can pretend it will all go away if he ignores it long enough."

Remus stood there looking increasingly uncomfortable,

"I don’t know what you want me to say Sirius."

"You know exactly what I want you to say, you just never will."

"How am I supposed to say anything?"

"Fair point," Sirius admitted. "You never have in the past. I don’t know what we were thinking."

"Still we," said Remus. "Always, always, we. How is that even possible?"

"You’re a clever man Remus, you tell me."

Jones pushed herself forward into the conversation, "You are both being unnecessarily aggressive. Remus is only trying to help you Sirius."

"No he’s not."

"It’s alright Sirius," her voice took on the sing-song quality of someone talking to a small child. "I know things are difficult at the moment but we can help you. It’s unfair the way you’re treated."

"Because my limp wrist makes it impossible to hold a wand straight?"

"I wouldn’t use such a term myself," she said severely. "But it is unreasonable to except the same standard of behaviour from you."

"Wait. What?" Harry demanded. "Is she saying –?"

"Yep," Sirius said tightly, "I should be let off the hook because you couldn’t expect anything better from a deviant."

"What a terrible person."

"I’m trying to help you," said Jones.

"Uh no," said Harry. "You wouldn’t know help if it punched you in the face. In fact you are forbidden from using that word. You keep using it and I do not think it means what you think it means. And the dictionary agrees with me." He drew his wand and flicked it at her twice. "So from now on whenever you intend to say help, you will instead say patronize. Nothing wrong with being truthful, right."

"That’s unfair. I just wanted to patronize." Jones gulped and pressed a hand over her mouth.

"I did tell you," said Harry.
Jones glared, “I was only trying to patronize Sirius. Stop it you’re being mean. I was only trying to patronize you.” She yelled out loud in frustration and shoved at Remus, “Do something. This is intolerable.”

“I don’t think that word means what you think it means either,” said Harry. If she thought that was intolerable she’d obviously had a very sheltered life.

Remus coughed, “You cannot go around cursing people,” he reproved.

“Yes I can,” said Harry, “it fits all the requirements for a justified curse. Injury done. Appropriate level of vengeance. Break clause.”

“What is the break clause then?”

“She has to apologize, and mean it, to everyone she’s patronized, sorry helped.”

“But,” Jones’ eyes were wide with horror.

“Oh dear,” said Harry. “Is that a lot?”

Sirius started to laugh. “Come on,” he said to Harry, “they’ll be complaining about this forever and it’ll get boring fast.”

“Wait Sirius,” Remus caught Sirius’ arm. Harry growled and yanked Remus’ hand away but didn’t say anything when Sirius stopped. The faint hope in Sirius as he turned towards his friend just about broke Harry’s heart.

“Yes Moony,” said Sirius.

“I know Hestia was being,” he glanced at Harry and smiled faintly, “patronizing, but she was right in a way. The Blacks are a dark family. It’s not your fault if you fell prey to your family magic. I know how much you hate it.”

“Oh shut the hell up,” yelped Harry, stung by the hurt in Sirius’ sharp intake of breath. “You know nothing.” He’d heard the love in Sirius’ voice when he’d talked about his family magic, Lupin did not get to insult it in front of him. “And the Black family is not dark, you stupid bastard.”

“Is that what he told you Harry?” said Lupin gently. “It’s not true. The Blacks are one of the darkest magical families. And that left a darkness in Sirius. But he can control it and work to overcome it. He can become a better person, I know he can.”

Harry snorted and aimed his wand. Sirius wrapped his fingers around his arm.

“Leave him be Harry. He’s already cursed. There’s nothing you can do to him to make things worse.”

“I can give it a bloody good go.”

“It’s not worth it. Come on.”

Reluctantly Harry left with Sirius, glaring at Lupin over his shoulder all the way. Lupin stayed looking patient and enduring. Harry wanted to hex him stupid. Outside it was cool and dark, the sickle moon casting long shadows.

“You’ll leave Remus be?” Sirius checked.
“If you want,” huffed Harry, annoyed Sirius hadn’t just left it so he could go back later and make Lupin regret being so stupid.

“I do. It’s not Remus’ fault really. Most of that was about himself more than it was about me. He’s like Tonks that way, he hates part of himself but unlike Tonks he can’t cut it out and leave it behind.”

“That doesn’t mean he can be rude to you.”

“For Merlin’s sake, you can’t go around cursing ever one who’s rude to me.”

“Why not.”

“Uh, sheer numbers. Also it’s not good for you.”

“It does wonders for my stress levels.”

“It’s still not good for you.”

“A little justified revenge never hurt anyone. Well, not the revenger anyway.”

“That’s how it starts,” said Sirius, “but then things slip and slip until you’re cursing people in the back for looking at you funny.”

Oh. Harry winced. Sirius was justifiably anxious about accidentally skidding into full on darkside.

“I promise I’ll be good,” he said. And he meant it. After all making people who were mean to your boyfriend sincerely regret it was very good.

“Sorry, I know you will. It’s just...”

“I know.”

“And my family magic –”

“Is not dark. You had dark family members, but I guess every family has those. Your family magic is not dark.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because your family magic is in you, and you are not dark. You’re starlight.”

“Yeah.” Sirius sounded so wistful it made Harry furious all over again.

“Yes,” he said crisply. “You-know-who is dark and he’s managed to destroy himself in like thirty years, your family has been going for centuries, there’s no way it can be dark.”

“There are those who say that’s proof we’re dark.”

“Well they’re just stupid. You can’t build anything lasting with dark magic. It crumbles away from under you, history is littered with examples.” Harry had gone looking in Hogwarts library during those periods when his magic was too fractured to re-join the war outside its walls. He’d found it quietly reassuring to know Riddle was doomed regardless.

“Nine-tenths of Hogwarts students sleep through History of Magic and the exceptions don’t pay attention. One day James will get Binns replaced. Give him a classroom and that ghost won’t even
notice he longer has students.”

“You paid attention.”

“Oh no, I was a sleeper. All my history is family history. And Remus isn’t wrong, a lot of Blacks were dark. I don’t know how we survived. We’re the only family who blasts a couple of people off the family tree every generation.”

“But they still have the Black family magic.”

“Sure. If they actually disowned them, they’d lose their magic from the family pool. They’re not crazy enough to do that.”

Harry thought about the Black family and how every generation there were a couple of crazy rebel Blacks strong enough to run from the family screaming their defiance to the stars. No wonder the Black magic was so powerful.

“When I inherited all the magic crunched home like a boot to the skull. James had to stun me. When I’d recovered enough to be mostly coherent, James, James and I, we ritually cut away all the tainted magic. Most of the corruption was recent but it was so spread out it was horrifying. I honestly thought I’d be mostly squib after we were done, but somehow after a month or two it all came springing back. By the end of year I was more powerful than before.”

“You said magic was like a tree, prune away the dead wood and it will spring back more alive than before.”

“If you say so,” said Sirius. “Do you like gardening as much as cooking?”

“Gardening is annoying, you can never get finished no matter how hard you try. But it’s nice cooking with your own ingredients.”

“So that’s a yes.”

“Uh.” Harry was used to thinking of plants as Neville’s thing, and the intricacies of botany didn’t hold his interest, but there was something satisfying about a garden. “Maybe.”

“We’ll get you a garden then.”

“A kitchen garden,” said Harry, surprised to find he had opinions about this potential garden. “With espaliered fruit trees. I’ve always thought they looked lovely.”

“Right, we’ll have them too. And you promise you’ll be patient with me. I did at least know what pruning was.”

“Of course.” Harry bumped up against him. “And espaliered is when you grow the fruit trees spread out against a wall.”

“Oh, there are a lot of dead trees against the walls in the garden at my old family house, I guess they would like nice if they had leaves and things.”

“And maybe a conservatory for oranges and lemons. If we make to the sunshine, we could bring some cuttings back with us.”

Sirius sighed, “It sounds too wonderful to think about.”

“Later,” Harry promised. He remembered what it was like when you’d been slogging through the
mud for so long it was impossible to imagine an end to it. “For now think about something fun to do tonight.”

“Something fun, huh?” Sirius sidled up to him sticking his hand in the back pocket of Harry’s jeans. “Don’t you have any suggestions?”

Harry scrubbed one hand through his hair. “Not particularly. I’m not great at this you realize.”

Sirius went tense against him.

“Uh, I’ve heard sleepy morning-after sex is the best,” he offered. “But we can’t really do that tonight.”

Sirius breathed in and out so fiercely Harry could hear the breath whistle though his teeth. The he kissed Harry’s cheek, “Alright then, I’ll pick tonight, and tomorrow morning we’ll have your sleepy morning after-sex.”

By the time they arrived back at the Three Broomsticks, Sirius had fought down the desire to brutally murder everyone who hadn’t taken the time to love Harry the way he should be loved. He could hardly claim to be better than them if he left Harry alone now for something as foolish as revenge. They’d had Harry and lost him, what worse could Sirius do to them.

On consideration Sirius walked them through the main door of the pub. Somehow they seemed to have gained tentative public approval of their relationship and Sirius wasn’t going to jeopardize that by acting as if they were trying to hide something. He didn’t want to hide anyway, he just felt he should because he was marking Harry’s card by making things so obvious. But Harry didn’t seem to care, and Sirius wasn’t ashamed, the opposite frankly, he was proud if disbelieving, so through the main door it was.

They collected a number of nods, but it was late and everyone was deep into their own affairs. It felt normal, if Sirius had any idea of what normal was after so many years.

Rosmerta waved to him,

“Sirius can I talk to you for a sec. Harry would you gather up the empties for Bethan.”

“Sure,” Harry stopped at the nearest table and started stacking pint glasses. Floating empties with magic wasn’t always the best plan with drunk people around. In fancier London places with automatic charms on the glasses and plates, Sirius had seen people walk right into the floating crockery, which always led to the most stupendous row. He sometimes wondered if people walked into them deliberately just to have something to shout about they seemed to enjoy it so much.

“What’s the matter Rosie?”

She beckoned him into the kitchen. And oh, that was a lot of spell work. The kitchen was a bubbling mass of cooking and cleaning.

“It started after you and Harry left,” Rosmerta whispered as they stood in the doorway. “We have enough food for the next week, and we’re running out of stores, but they don’t seem to be able to stop.”

“I’m sorry. Harry must have been more anxious about leaving you with all the work than I realized.”
“I don’t mind,” said Rosmerta. “I’m worried. Do you know how much charm work like that would cost?”

“It’s not charm work. Harry was anxious about you having to do all the cooking and the kitchen picked up on it. It’s fine.” Sirius put his fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply. “Alright. Enough now.”

Everything stopped, hovered in the air briefly, then slowly, dejectedly, started to tidy themselves away.

“Okay I feel bad now,” said Rosmerta.

“Tell your kitchen it did well but it’s enough now.”

“Uh, thank you, that was a big help, but it’s all done now. Thank you.”

The mess of things did an excited swirl followed by an energetic flypast before settling back into quietly tidying themselves away.

Rosmerta gripped his arm tightly, “Sirius, just how powerful is Harry?”

“More powerful than me, other than that I’m not sure. But this doesn’t need much magic really, Harry loves cooking, and kitchens, he cares about you and your kitchen. If there’s love powering it, magic is a snap.”

“I know you can do more powerful magic if your spouse is in danger, or your children. Everyone knows that. But –”

“Yes, it’s particularly obvious then. But it applies to all sorts of love. Think about it. You love this place, when you use magic to clean I bet you feel more powerful than you did when you started. But if you cleaned for a living you’d be exhausted by the end of the day.”

“I supposed I had noticed that but I thought it was because I liked my place sparkly clean.”

“It sort of is that. The theorists hate the whole thing, a lot deny it even exists, because it’s not quantifiable and it can’t be forced. Hell, a plain old day can remove the effect.”

Rosmerta smiled suddenly, “So all this,” she waved a hand at the kitchen, “is the result of Harry having a truly spectacular day.”

“Oh, you could look at it like that.”

She grinned slyly at him, “Well keep up the good work.”

Sirius could feel himself turning red, “I didn’t mean…” he spluttered. “You can’t say that. And you definitely can’t smile at me like that.”

“If you say not,” she said, making no effort to stop smiling at him. She patted him on the shoulder and swished away.

“Harry,” Sirius called after her, “Rosie’s being mean to me.”

“Good, you undoubtedly deserve it,” Harry yelled back cheerfully.

“Huh, what sort of boyfriend are you anyway,” Sirius flounced, pausing to kiss Harry as he walked past him into kitchen carrying two tall stacks of glasses.
“A really mean one,” said Harry seriously as his eyes gleamed mischievously.

Bethan made a retching sound, “Yuck, you two are revoltingly sweet. How can you stand it, Rosmerta?”

“You get hardened in your old age. Also I can send them to bed.”

“I’d argue with you,” said Sirius, “but actually I thinking going to bed is an excellent plan. Harry?”

“I could be persuaded.” Harry peeked up at him from under his lashes.

“Alright enough,” said Rosmerta. “No more flirting in my kitchen. Now Bethan and I have a surprise for you.”

Sirius eyed her cautiously, “Good or bad.”

“Good I hope. So firstly I’m sorry but I can’t keep letting you use the best bedroom.”

“Of course not,” said Sirius immediately. “Sorry. I should have thought. Did you want me to –?”

“Stop right there Sirius Black. I was happy to lend you the room, but it’s not a long term arrangement. So Bethan and I cleaned the attic room out for you.”

“Oh you needn’t –”

“Shush you. Harry deserves a room of his own. It’s sorted. All you have to do is say thank you.”

“Then thank you,” said Sirius.

“Yes, thank you,” said Harry. “But I didn’t need a whole room.”

“Yes you did,” said Rosmerta. “A room with a door and hopefully a silencing charm.”

Sirius knew he was blushing again. This was the problem with stupid porcelain pale skin.

“And you should have your own room. You don’t have to share it with Sirius if you don’t want to.”

Harry clutched for him like he thought Sirius was about to vanish.

“Alright then,” said Rosmerta. “Up the stairs with the pair of you.”

“Thank you Rosie,” Sirius said quietly as Bethan dragged Harry over to the rickety ladder pinned to the wall and showed him how the latch to the overhead door worked. Harry kicked off his shoes and clambered up.

“You haven’t seen it yet. It’s hardly up to your standards.”

“It’s perfect,” said Sirius confidently. He scrambled up the ladder after Harry and found the attic room to be a small room tucked under the eaves. There was a desk, chest of drawers and the far end of the room a large double mattress flopped across the floor, covered in a duvet and piled high with cushions.

Harry beamed at the room, running around to peer out the windows, check the chest of drawers, and sit briefly at the desk. Then he let himself fall back onto the mattress bouncing in place with a creak of springs.
“Silencing charm!” yelled Rosmerta from down below.
Harry watched as Sirius put up a silencing charm.

“Otherwise we’ll get nothing but grief. Oh and here, I got you a present.”

“A present?” Harry sat up. He loved presents.

“Yes.” Sirius pulled a book out of his pocket of his robe and passed it to him. “Uh, it’s kinda second hand.”

“That’s okay,” said Harry, reaching out with grabby hands for his present. It was a thick heavy volume, bound in red leather, the title stamped in silver. ‘The Secrets of an Animagus’.

Harry shivered feeling the beat of wings in the back of his head. He had an animagus form and he’d have thought being able to truly fly would have made him happier. But he only got to slip into his falcon form on scouting trips to survey the enemy and it kinda sucked all his enjoyment out of the process. Still it was a very nice gift, he flicked through the pages. The handwritten notes caught his attention immediately, and then there was a quick line drawing of a stag and a dog tussling over a stick.

“Wait, is this your book?”

“Yes,” Sirius fidgeted with the edge of his robe and finally took it off. “I probably should have got you a new copy –”

“No, this is perfect.” Harry flipped the book open at random. There was an extensive commentary on a couple of lines, a note against one of the references – purebred idiot ignore – and half a potion recipe. There was also a sketch of James failing to do a handstand all jangly arms and legs.

“Who’s the artist?” Harry asked.

“Uh, if it’s recognizable as something then it will have been Pete.”

Cold crawled down Harry’s spine. “Pete?”

“He was a friend of ours back at Hogwarts. He,” Sirius laughed without humour, “well it’s a long story but in the end he was murdered because of you-know-who.”

“Oh. – I’m sorry,” Harry hastily tacked on the appropriate sympathy.

“It’s fine.” He laughed again, ugly and broken. “It was all a very long time ago.” Ducking his head, he stripped off his t-shirt, hiding his face behind the fabric.
Harry paged through the book looking at the little pictures. One end of chapter page had a Marauders banner and a sketch of all four of them, almost caricatures: James a lanky beanpole, Remus hunched and half-starved with the wolf in his eyes, round little Peter, and Sirius with,

“Are those pigtails?”

Sirius wandered up and peered over Harry’s shoulder,

“Of course you’d turn right to that one. Some kind soul once said I was prettier than any girl. So Pete drew me with pigtails or bunches for the next six months because he was a dick.”

Harry turned his head to look at him, “You are prettier than any girl.”

“Don’t you start.”

“You’re prettier than anybody.” Harry waved one arm to show how all-encompassing that was.

“Also – was the kind soul Snape?”

Sirius sighed heavily. Harry grinned,

“I told you he had the hots for you.”

“Oh god. Stop. It’s bad enough you’re trying to convince everyone else.”

Harry kept on grinning, “No, the really bad part is that you’re starting to think I might be right.”

“You are a horrible, horrible person,” said Sirius, sliding his way between Harry and the desk.

“Seems to be the case,” agreed Harry and shifted his chair back so Sirius could sit down on his lap.

Sirius draped his arms over Harry’s shoulders. “And you’re not even sorry for it.”

“No, not at all.” Harry had lost track of what they were talking about. He was only saying words to keep Sirius’ focus on him. Keep those beautiful silver eyes watching him so carefully. His own eyes crossed as Sirius moved closer and whatever nonsense words were spilling from his mouth faded as Sirius kissed him.

When Harry could concentrate again he said, “Thank you for the book.”

“My pleasure.” Sirius rolled his hips. “While temporary transformation into animal forms can be sustained for few hours, the animagus transformation is the transformation into a wizard’s true animal form. They say it takes its form from the wizard’s soul.” Sirius squeezed his legs around Harry’s hips, rocking closer.

“God,” moaned Harry. “You would start explaining shit now.”

“Having trouble concentrating,” teased Sirius as he ran his hands through Harry’s hair. Harry tilted his head back into the contact and Sirius obliged, scraping his finger nails lightly against his scalp. Harry’s hips surged forward and Sirius’ legs clamped down tight to keep his position.

“You are a horrible, horrible person,” Harry gasped.

“And I’m going to prove it.” Sirius kissed him, a simple peck on the lips, then continued, “The animagus form can be reached through meditation but more commonly a revealing potion is used.”

Harry put his hands flat on top of Sirius’ thighs determined to hold out as long as he could before
picking the distracting man up, carrying him across to their bed and pinning him to the mattress.

“It tastes awful by the way, the potion. The transformation is ideally managed by the wizard themselves by accessing their animagus form internally until an external transformation is achieved. There is a potion for guided dreams. I never got anywhere with that one, and Pete said it gave him nightmares but that might have been his form. I think James found it useful though.

Harry groaned as Sirius distracted himself with his explanation.

“Oh sorry love, am I neglecting you.” He rocked his hips and traced down the tendons of Harry’s neck with the soft tips of his fingers and then with the edge of his nails, as he continued,

“There is a potion that can be used to force the transformation. The book advises against it, so of course we tried it. It tastes even worse, if you can believe that, but you barely have time to notice before your body is being squished and twisted into a new shape. New but also one that you recognize, that’s yours. It’s like, have you ever dislocated a joint?”

Harry’s hazed mind realized that was a question. Sirius expected him to concentrate, Sirius expected him to talk – while his hands were sliding under the waist band of Harry’s jeans and drifting lower.

“Dislocation?” prompted Sirius.


Sirius chuckled, “Yes, very definitely ouchie. So when you click into your animal form, it’s like your joint clicking back into place – pure relief, even though everything technically still hurts. The animal side is very close to the surface after that and it takes a long while to calm down. I can’t recommend it, but it does speed things up. So if you want to try it, let me know and I’ll supervise. Or you could –”

“I am going to kill you,” said Harry seriously.

“With your dick?” asked Sirius hopefully.

“Definitely kill you.”

Sirius’ thumbs stroked over the sensitive skin at the join of his hips. “I can tell you some more about the animagus potion if you need the motivation.”

Harry dug his fingers into Sirius’ hips, he was going to strangle the wretched man. Sirius was saying something, Harry had no idea what, when the low buzz of noise drifting up from the street as everyone left at closing time suddenly erupted into shouts and yells. Then someone screamed. It didn’t sound scared, it sounded angry, like an alarm siren.

Sirius and Harry tripped over themselves and the chair as they both tried to jump to their feet. Untangling themselves, they grabbed their wands. Harry scrubbed his other hand over his face, his haze sand-blasted away. The scream came again, and with it the spit of spellfire.

“You good to go?” Sirius checked.

Harry nodded.

“Take my hand, I’ll apparate us both down to the street.” Harry nodded and curled his fingers around Sirius’ hand.
“Let’s go.”

Sirius squeezed his hand, “Luck Harry.”

“Luck Sirius.”

And then their room vanished and they were stood in the cold street under the half light of the moon. It was a mess of screaming bodies and the stark flash of curses. After a second to adjust, Harry was able to reform into some sort of order. As the last of the drinkers left at chucking out time, the white masked, dark robed, death eaters had come pouring around the sides of the building, cutting them off and trapping them against the shops opposite. Then they had attacked. Behind the line of attackers, Bethan stood at the door of the pub, trying to fight off one of the dark robes.

“You get to Bethan, I’ll cover,” ordered Sirius. “We need to break the line of death eaters so the villagers can make it back inside. The pub is the safest place.”

Harry nodded and took off running. The wall of death eaters was already fracturing as they broke into groups to surround individual villagers. With dreadful inevitability there came the casting of crucio and then the real screaming began. He’d seen all this play out before far too many times before, so the rush of fury caught Harry completely off-guard. How dare those death eaters attack his people.

He stayed low and fast, dodging the one death eater who tried to stop him. Their attention was quickly caught by another civilian. Harry ducked another two flashes of light, and then he had Bethan and her attacker in clear line of sight. She was struggling to fight the death eater, she was trying one jinx after another. The death eater kept dispelling them with mocking twists of his wand, laughing at her desperation.

His back was to Harry, the idiot hadn’t noticed his and Sirius’ arrival. Harry slammed two quick pugilios into the unprotected back. It wasn’t his strongest spell but in a confused situation like this it was one of the safest. In the mayhem he couldn’t risk anything lethal. Even missing and hitting a building with a blasting curse could injure civilians.

The death eater spun to face him. Harry snapped off a third charm as he ran. The pugilio caught the death eater in the chest and he staggered. Behind him Bethan dropped her wand and snatched up the cast iron boot scraper by the door with both hands. Swinging it by its handle she crashed the heavy base into the death eater’s ribs. The force of it knocked her off-balance and she dropped the scraper, but it didn’t matter because the death staggered and collapsed.

And then Harry reached them. He kicked the dark robe, aiming for the vulnerable kidneys.

“Get your wand,” he yelled to Bethan. He kicked the death eater again. Smacking his hand down on the door post, he felt the wards surge up under his command. They couldn’t extend into the street but as Harry ran with them, they soared with him right up to the edge of property line. Their strength shoved the collapsed death eater away and tipped him out onto the cobbles.

Someone not in a dark robe ran past and Harry grabbed his arm and dragged him inside the ward boundary. The civilian was clutching his bleeding arm and stared wild-eyed at Harry. He gave him a push towards the door,

“Bethan! Get him inside. See if Rosmerta can call in a medic over the floo.”

There was a crumpled body abandoned by its tormentors. Harry wasn’t sure if he was still alive,
but hopeful he reached out with his wand and hauled the body to him. The man’s face was waxy pale but he seemed to be breathing. Harry swivelled his wand and sent him back to Bethan.

Turning back to the fight, he focused in on the nearest group of dark robes.

Sirius watched Harry run. Two rapid flipendos picked off the two death eaters who aimed for him, slamming them both into the ground. A third more alert death eater twisted around to aim at Sirius himself. Sirius ducked behind a flower barrel, the summer flowers now straggly and half-dead. A bright flash of yellow light blew over his head exploding harmlessly into pale sparks. He traced out a quick shield charm, shot to his feet, and blasted his opponent off his.

The street was madness. The trapped villagers were hammering on the doors of the shops pleading to be let in. One resident had taken the risk and opened their door. That house was already on fire.

Sirius aimed two water conjuring charms at the house. It wouldn’t help much but it would keep the doorway from going up in flames until he could get them out of there. Then he cast sonorous on himself and his voice echoed across the fight,

“Clear the street! Get back in the pub!”

“Is that Black?” shouted one of the death eaters. “Step for forward traitor and return to face your lord’s justice and we will let the others go.”

Sirius ducked low to avoid the flurry of curses suddenly flying in his direction.

“Liar,” shrieked Harry from across the street. “You words mean nothing because you can only speak lies.”

Bless him, Harry had completely distracted the death eaters who were now slinging curses in his direction. Sirius cast a temporary shield and ran for a gate between the houses. The gate was slightly inset so when he pressed himself flat against it, he was slightly protected by the lip of the wall.

He could see two death eaters standing in front of the door, casting the occasional curse to keep the inhabitants trapped. And he could hear the family trapped in the burning house, the high-pitched cries of the children, a low sobbing, and the father’s,

“Let my kids go, they’ve done nothing to you.”

“And wasn’t it your boy who opened the door to these rabble?”

“He didn’t know what he was doing.”

Sirius had to get both at the same time, or the second death eater would have the chance to end the game and bring down the house on the family. After linking two spells together, he shifted and took careful aim – and something crashed back inside the house. The mother screamed and the baby’s shrieks reached a new higher pitch, and the little boy ran out into the street.

One of the death eater’s hit him with a crucio.

Sirius slammed them both with an amped up tinnitus jinx and they dropped their wands and fell, clutching their heads at the sudden overwhelming roar inside their ears.
The father ran out and clutched up his son.

“The pub,” Sirius shouted. “Get to the pub.” He reached in and dragged the mother out the burning house, baby in her arms, middle child clinging to her skirts. The father jolted into movement when he saw his wife, and then they were all running. Sirius fled with them, conjuring a shield to try and deflect the curses coming their way. But the extended shield and the sheer number of death eaters – clearing the street was working against them now – made it hopeless.

“Harry!”

Harry knocked three death eaters aside and stretching out with his magic was able to grab hold of their trembling victim, yanking him into the safety of the wards. Bethan ran out into the street and started tugging the civilians back behind the ward line.

“Bethan you need to get back.”

“I’m not running,” she snarled, blonde hair every which way and a fierce light in her eyes.

“At least stand behind the wards.” He dodged a sickly green spell and fired back another pugilio, nailing the death eater right in his stupid white mask and sending him crashing backwards.

“Shut up and do something useful.”

“And you, you need to pick one spell and stick with it. Every time you stop to try and think what to cast next, you hesitate. You only change up your spells when you’re fighting a duel and need the flashy style points. I will never understood how you can knock out your opponent and still lose the duel.” He flicked his wand and struck a death eater with three snappy pugilios and knocked him into his neighbour sending them both stumbling.

“God, you are exactly like Lord Black, how do you stand yourselves.”

“Thank you,” said Harry, confused by the random compliment. With his free hand he shot out his magic and pulled the unconscious victim towards them.

“It wasn’t a compliment. Only Lord Black, or apparently you, could start teaching in the middle of a death eater attack.”

“It’s true,” he protested. In a real fight the last thing you could afford was to waste time picking through all the charms you knew.

“That is not my point.”

Bethan was a fast learner though, because the next death eater in her sights she struck with four tripping jinxes in a row. The third one got through and tipped him face first into the cobblestones.

Harry lost sight of her then, he was too busy dragging bodies into the safety of the wards. The death eaters had realized what they were doing and curses were coming their way. The bright blaze of the curses splatted against the shimmering silver of the wards bursting into useless flares of light that dissipated into the cold air. The wards weren’t even weakening, Harry could feel them gearing up for a fight, daring the death eaters to try and take them.

The more coherent civilians had discovered they were safe off the street. One of the men was picking up anything he could find and chucking it at the death eaters, even his shoes. Three of the
lads had grabbed up the pub’s outdoor metal chairs and were battering any death eater who came too close. The wards were helping them, bulging outwards to keep them safe.

The chaos in the street was clearing quickly. That surprised Harry until it struck they’d only been maybe twenty civilians leaving the pub. Most of them were now safely behind the wards. There were two unfortunates surrounded by a cluster of death eaters. One of the groups was laughing at a death eater who couldn’t manage a crucio and offering to demonstrate on him.

Other death eaters, circling around to discover the street bare of victims, turned towards them. He raised his free arm to block a couple of spells, but then the death eaters focus switched.

“Harry!”

Snapping around, he saw Sirius was trying to shepherd a small family across the street. The death eaters were all turning to focus on them, hammering them with violent slashes of spells.

Harry circled the tip of his wand twice and launched a shield charm towards them, tagging it to the boy in his father’s arms. Then he launched a counter-blast at the death eaters, quick snaps of pugilios that weren’t really intended to do any more than make the death eaters flinch and miss their targets. Bethan popped up at his side, there was a bloody scrape across her cheek and her pupils were blown wide. She didn’t seem to realize she was laughing as she cast the tripping jinx again and again, making the death eaters hop and jump.

They were almost across the street, when the child caught her foot on a cobble and tumbled down with a screech. Sirius shoved the mother to keep her running, then skidded on his toes as he reversed to scoop up the little girl.

In the kerfuffle Sirius lost his own shield and he was now out of range of Harry’s.

“Harry!”

Harry had half a second to work out Sirius’ plan and then the girl was thrown towards him boosted with Sirius’ magic. He opened his arms reaching out with his own magic and she landed solidly against his chest and he clutched her close. He took one gasping relieved breath. Then he shoved her at Bethan and ran.

Sirius avoided the first attack by dodging away from safety. His shield back up as the death eaters re-aimed and he warded off the lick of the spells. But now all the death eater attention was caught on him. And even as he dodged one of them detonated the ground beneath him and blasted him off his feet. He flipped through the air and landed with a dull thud that rattled his bones. He put one hand on the muddy stones to push himself to his feet but his arm collapsed beneath his weight.

Boots appeared in his limited view.


Sirius locked his jaw against the inevitable.

“Crucio!”

Somewhere beyond the pain he head Harry scream for him.
Harry’s brain whited-out. His breath was loud in his ears as he sprinted across the street. Sirius’ body spasmed, then he somehow gathered enough control to roll over out of range of the curse. Another death eater flicked his wand to drag him back. The lead death eater laughed,

“Nice try Black. Crucio!”

There was a confused shout as Harry crashed into them. Before they recovered, he’d slammed his hand flat against the bastard’s chest.

“Expulso!” he ground out, shoving his magic out through the palm of his hand. The force of it blew the man backwards, the sudden hole in his chest spewing a thick mess of blood.

Yells of alarm erupted from the death eaters.

Harry smirked, all teeth. See how they liked it. The dark robes converged on him. Sirius was still vulnerable behind him. Harry was going to make himself enough of a problem they’d forget all about him. He dropped his wand and grabbed onto two dark robed arms.

“Expulso!”

Sirius could hear the screams but his stupid body wouldn’t listen to his frantic instructions. His trembling fingers skittered across the gritty cobbles searching for his wand.

Then there was a furious crack of apparition and the street began to flood with power as James made the loudest, most intimidating entrance he could manage. Sirius lifted his hand and the let the friendly feel of Jay’s magic twine around him. It gave him the energy to plant his hands on the ground and shove himself up enough to see. The mess of blood and bodies filled him with terror, “Harry!”

The dark robes began to vanish in sharp little cracks of apparition. Harry hissed after his disappearing prey. The flap of a dark robe caught his attention and he pounced on them.

The death eater screamed,

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Harry stalled. His brain not quite able to compute but feeling he should not tear his prey to shreds like he intended. He rocked slightly, trapped between competing impulses.

Sirius screamed his name.

Harry no longer cared. He dropped the death eater with a stupefy and raced back to Sirius, falling to his knees beside him.

“Sirius, Sirius are you okay?” His hands hovered over Sirius, no quite daring to touch.

“Oh thank Merlin,” gasped Sirius. Harry gently caught his trembling, clutching hands.

“Sirius.”

Sirius scrabbled for closer and Harry eased his shaking body up onto his lap, curling his own body
around him. Sirius took a great shuddering breath and slumped against him. Harry stroked his hand through Sirius’ sweaty hair. His skin was cool to touch, no fever, no deadness of shock. Harry sighed and dropped a kiss on the top of head.

“You’re going to be okay,” he promised.

“I’m fine,” said Sirius, because Sirius was an idiot. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m okay, I wasn’t the one who –”

A presence loomed over them, and the air around them was thick with magic. Harry shifted to cover Sirius and glared up.

James Potter smiled at him. “Please don’t kill me.”

Relief shook through him as he realized the cavalry had arrived. James squatted down beside them, his face shadowed.

“You two okay?” he asked roughly.

“We’re fine,” said Sirius, because Sirius was an idiot.

“They crucio’d Sirius,” said Harry.

“Bastards.”

“I’m fine,” Sirius insisted. “And you’re a tattletale.”

“Don’t be mean to Harry,” James scolded. “And sure you are. Let’s see you stand up.”

Sirius growled. It was the sad little growl of a bedraggled puppy. Harry clutched him closer.

“Yeah you just stay there,” said James. “I’ll go see if I can find you a potion.” He looked up. “Oh hang on.” He rose to his feet and raised his voice. “Hey, you stop that. I said stop that right now.”

Several of the villagers reluctantly stepped from where they’d been kicking the crumpled death eaters who still remained sprawled across the street.

“If you’ve got that much energy in you, go do something useful and help put out that fire. Murphy, you’ve got some sense, come here and supervise. We’ve got to get it out before it breaches anyone else’s wards or the whole village will go up.”

Murphy gave the death eater one last kick, then jogged over to the flame stricken shop, calling for a couple of his mates to follow.

“Nicholson, can you and your wife go stand by Heathcotes and turn back anyone who wants to take a look see. Remind them the Aurors are going to show up eventually and they’re not known for being discriminating when it comes to arrests.”

“Right you are sir.”

“Thacker, come here and help me with the prisoners.”

There were five dark robed figures scattered across the street. Two of them were very obviously dead – Harry did good work if he said so himself – and one was going to be dead soon if he wasn’t already judging by the blood gushing from his severed arm. The remaining two however seemed
likely to live. One was making frantic attempts to drag himself to his feet and failing; the other, the one who had apologised to Harry was collapsed in on himself shuddering.

Sirius started to struggle.

“Stay down,” Harry urged. “It’s okay.”

“I need to know who they were.”

“They were death eaters.”

“Soft target,” said Sirius. “These will be the fledges. Let me up, Harry.”

“Sirius, it’s okay.”

“It is not okay. Let me up. I’ll have watched them graduate this summer.”

Harry shifted, braced, and then levered them both upright. James was crouched by one of the dead death eaters, pulling aside their mask.

“Malciber,” he said. “What the hell did you do to him? It looks like you scooped his insides out.”

“Expulso,” said Harry.

“Very nice. Is that why we’ve got a few arms cluttering up the place?”

“Yeah, sorry.” He should have remembered civilians didn’t like stray limbs. It freaked them out worse than dead bodies for some reason.

“Don’t apologize on my account.”

“Who else did they get?” asked Sirius.

James looked at him, started to say something, then changed his mind and shook his head. The second death eater, Harry had blasted away most of his hip, was on his back. His mask came off to reveal a young face, its aristocratic pointiness lost in the slackness of death.

“Julian Flint,” said James. He reached out and closed the staring eyes.

“Never stood a chance,” growled Sirius.

“Sorry,” said Harry tangled between guilty and angry.

“Oh not you, alley cat. He was desperately in love with Pamela Nott, and that whole family are true believers. Of course he signed on. You did him a favour Harry, it was only going to get worse for him. He was the sort of idiot who’d recant and end up being tortured to death by you-know-who himself.”

Harry pressed his face against Sirius’ neck and wished there were words that could make things right.

James moved on to the death eater with the arm blown off at the elbow. He was dead now and the body heavy and limp as James rolled it over and carefully removed the mask.

“Andras Rosier,” he said quietly. “I have never had a student give me so much lip. I wouldn’t have minded if he’d bloody learned something.”
Sirius leaned forward, placed his hand on James’ shoulder and gripped tightly.

After a moment James pulled himself back up, “Alright, let’s deal with the living.”

The still struggling death eater, fluttering like a fly trapped in honey, swore violently at them as they approached. James sighed and drew his wand. The death eater flipped into a sitting position, and then an incarcerous wrapped around his arms and legs pinning him in place. James reached out to draw the hood down with his hand, but the death eater swung his head trying to hit him. James drew his hand back and used his wand to strip the death eater of his hood and mask.

“Octavian Yaxley. I wish I could say I was surprised.”

“Think you’re so clever Potter. We’re coming for you and your bitch. We’ll have our fun with him. Fuck him til he’s screaming for it. Just like we did your mudblood wh-”

Sirius’ hand snapped out and the silencing charm left Yaxley mouthing impotent threats.

James had gone pale, “That’s the story doing the rounds.”

“Yeah.”

“That Lily – That they – Lily was –” he couldn’t bring himself to say it and stalked away with his head down.

Sirius followed him, and Harry followed Sirius.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Sirius tentatively stroked James’ shoulder. “They’ve slung it my way from time to time these last couple of years. I didn’t think anyone would have the neck to shove it in your face though. I should have told you but I couldn’t quite, sorry,” Sirius shrunk in on himself as much as he could as James turned to face him.

“Don’t be more of an idiot than you can help.” James grabbed Sirius’ arm and shook it lightly. “Do you have any idea how it started?”

“Not really. Though to be honest I don’t think they were originally aimed at you. I think, guessing from some of the stories, they were trying to get a rise out of Snape.”

“Snape? Why would they want to get at Snape?”

“I don’t know. Because anybody who spends longer than ten minutes with the man wants to get at him. Because Snape is one of the top guys, or at least appears to be.”


“What would make sense?”

“Power struggle between the original guys, and the younger lot. You can see something similar in the Order. The war is taking too long on both sides. Bill and Charlie don’t want to go through the same motions that haven’t got us anywhere these last twenty years. The death eaters must have some of the same tensions.” James smiled, a brief flicker of amusement, “And also because anyone who spends longer than ten minutes with the man wants to get at him.”

“Told you,” said Sirius.

There was a shout and they turned back to see Yaxley trying kick Thacker with his bound feet.
“Sorry,” James apologised Sirius, and then hit Yaxley with a full-body bind.

“It’s fine,” said Sirius.

“If you say that you’re fine one more time,” threatened Harry, “and I’m going to hit you with a truth-telling hex.”

“Pot, kettle,” said Sirius. Harry huffed, that was not the point.

The final death eater peeled off his own mask as they approached. He looked wrecked, pale as a ghost, anxiety lines scored across his face, blue eyes red-rimmed and sore.

“Gavan Selwyn,” said James.

“I’m sorry,” Selwyn wailed. “I’m sorry. I should have listened to you Professor Black. I didn’t know it would be like this.”

Sirius took a deep breath, Harry could tell he was trying to shove down his temper because he’d have told Selwyn it would be exactly like this,

“I wish you had.”

“Will you tell them I’m sorry?”

Sirius ran his hands through his hair – around them the hard-face villagers did not look receptive to apologies, they were still trying to put out the flames.

“Yeah,” said Sirius finally, “yeah I’ll tell them.”

“Thank you.”

“You need to wait there for the Aurors,” said James. “They’ll be here soon.”

“Sure they will,” muttered Sirius.

“Yes Professor Potter, I’ll do that. I’m sorry sir.”

“I’m sorry too,” said James. He turned away, urging Harry and Sirius in front of him. “Come on if we floo through and tell the Aurors the nasty death eaters are gone, I’m sure we can get someone over to take care of this. Sirius not a word.”

“Anything you say,” said Sirius.

“I said not a –”

He broke off as a woman started it to scream. Chills crawled over Harry’s skin as all the hair on raised on the back of his neck. It was the horrible repetitive rising scream of a bereaved mother.

The screaming, struggling woman was being dragged back by two witches. On the ground Rosmerta was kneeling opposite another lady Harry didn’t recognise, and between them lay Bethan, long links of slithery pulsing guts spilling out of the bloody gouge where her stomach should be. She was still alive, her face as white as paper her breath fluttery with pain and shock.

“Disembowelment hex,” whispered Sirius.

“Lowenna, are you sure there’s you can do,” Rosmerta begged. “What about St Mungos? Sirius
would pay for it, I know he would.”

“I’m sorry,” said the other witch, “all I can do is make her comfortable. Even if they agreed to take her, St Mungos could do nothing more. It’s invariably fatal.”

“Sirius?” James asked urgently.

“She’s right,” said Sirius. “I know of only one person who survived, Altair Black, and that needed a unicorn.”

“We can get a unicorn, somehow.” James did not sound convinced. “We could try at least.”

“No, we – wait, Harry, when you healed my hand –?”

“What was wrong with your hand?” demanded James.

“I broke it, it doesn’t matter, shut up Prongs, this is important. Harry when you healed my hand, that didn’t exhaust you, did it?”

“No,” said Harry, “but,” he waved one hand helplessly at the mess of Bethan’s stomach. “I’m not sure I can.”

“Lord Black,” said Lowenna, “I know you want to help, but healing doesn’t help in this case. It only prolongs the victim’s agony. The inflammation and swelling left over from –”

“That’s it Lowenna, there wasn’t any swelling. My hand was as good as new. Look, it was only a couple of days ago. There isn’t even a bruise left.” Sirius held out his hand for inspection, and then staggered without his grip on Harry.

Lowenna scrambled to her feet and snatched at his hand bringing it up to her face. “You broke this recently? It doesn’t look like it.” She wasn’t old but there were lines of strain engraved in her face and her eyes had the wet look of someone trying not to cry.

“Lowenna I wouldn’t lie. I know that wouldn’t help. But maybe?”

“I don’t know. Without inflamed guts to poison her. It might work. I don’t know.” She looked at the woman who must be Bethan’s mother. She’d stopped weeping and was watching the conversation with frozen, painful intensity. “Elizabeth, I don’t know if this will succeed. I’ve never seen Lord Black’s friend work, I can’t even be sure he could temporarily heal her. But unless we try…” she trailed off. “Do we try?”

“Yes,” said Bethan’s mother. “Yes, try anything that might save my baby.”

“Harry?” Sirius asked, “I’m sorry, I kind of jumped you into this.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m willing to try. I just, I have no training, they didn’t want me to waste my time with healing. I only tried in emergencies.”

“Harry.” Lowenna took both his frantic hands in hers. “I understand. I’m glad you were honest with us. But this is an emergency. Bethan is going to die.”

Bethan’s mother sobbed behind him.

“If you can’t help, I will understand. But I would like you to try, Harry. Please.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sirius again. Harry shook his head,
“No, I want to try.” There was a chance that his weird inability to heal people properly would actually work out in his patient’s favour for once. “I just,” he shook his head and gently pulled his hands away from the healer. He crouched down beside Bethan.

“Bethan.”

“Hey Harry. Guess I should have stayed behind the wards, huh.”

“We’ll see. Did you hear all that? Are you okay with me trying to heal you? I have to warn you, people say it hurts a lot. I think Sirius thought I’d burned his hand off and I was only healing a broken bone.”

“I don’t care.” She glanced behind him at her mother. “I want to stay for my mum. I don’t care how much it hurts.” She looked back at him, her eyes blown wide, “Don’t stop, no matter what I say.”

“Okay.”

“And, even if it doesn’t work, thank you for trying.”

“Alright.” Harry held out his hand and his summoned wand zipped towards him. His hands worked well enough for blasting curses, but for precision and strength he needed his wand. He petted the wood and could feel the magic, tired but determined, respond. Sirius tumbled down beside them. He took Bethan’s hand in his. Then turned to smile encouragingly at Harry,

“When you’re ready.”

Harry pointed his wand at the wound and let his magic build. He could feel Sirius’ magic, still ragged with pain, flow over to join his. Then James stepped up behind him and put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. His magic pooled down to join theirs.

As ready as he could be, Harry said, “Heal!” loudly and firmly.

Bethan’s scream cut off abruptly as she sagged back into unconsciousness. Behind them someone caught Bethan’s mother as she tried to run forward. Then all Harry had was the fight of making Bethan’s uncooperative body heal. He could feel the sweat on his face and the ache in his head. There was a hot trickle down his face. When it reached his lips he could taste the salt and knew his nose was bleeding.

He was reaching his limits, when there was a sudden shy boost to his magic. It was the healer Lowenna. It wasn’t much but the surprise of it helped him grind on. Then Rosmerta’s magic was there and he grabbed onto that too. Then it was a string of small magics offering themselves and Harry couldn’t let them down, so he kept powering through, Sirius and James’ magic keeping him grounded. Keeping going was hard but easy at the same time. You just had to not stop. His face was all blinding pressure and his bones burned.

Then, finally, it was done.

Harry sagged forwards, James hauling him back before he toppled over onto Bethan. Then Sirius was there catching him and Harry wilted into him. There were words soft in his hair and hands telling him he’d done well. Remembering he had eyes, he opened them. It took him a moment to readjust to the world of people instead of smears of magic. Sirius’ hand was tight around his wrist.

“You okay?”
“Umgh,” said Harry, not sure how to cope with speaking yet. He looked over at Bethan, still lying on the ground, Lowenna fussing over her. “Ufgh?”

“I think so. You certainly fixed up her t-shirt all pretty. Lowenna’s checking now.”

“She’s perfectly healthy,” said Lowenna. “I don’t understand it. It’s like she was never injured at all. Bethan,” she patted the girl’s cheek, “Can you hear me?”

Bethan twitched and she lifted her head. “What? Oh. Did.” She blinked several times, her eyes crusty with tears. Lowenna wiped them gently with a cloth. “I don’t understand. It doesn’t hurt. Did it not work?” She blinked again. Her mouth shook.

“No sweetheart, it did work. Somehow Harry managed to, not heal you exactly, but fix things as if you had never been hurt. Can you sit up?”

“Yes, I,” bracing herself, Bethan sat up. “It doesn’t hurt,” she said wonderingly. She looked down at her t-shirt. “There isn’t even any blood.” She looked around, “Where’s my mum.”

“We had to stun her, sweetheart. Come on I’ll take you to her.”

“Urgh,” Harry let himself go boneless, Sirius the only thing holding him together.

“Yes,” said Sirius, “that was possibly the most exhausting thing I’ve ever done and I wasn’t even doing anything.”

“The fact that the two of you fought twenty or so death eaters to standstill might have something to do with it,” said James. He pushed himself to his feet. “Merlin, I’m getting old. I can hear my bones creaking.”

Moving was beyond them all. They stayed there for a long moment that might have gone on forever except there was a sudden pop-pop-pop of multiple apparitions.

James groaned, “That’s all we need.”

“Umph-urhh,” said Harry. His mouth was still mush. Words were hard. He flapped his arms trying to get back up.

“No, no,” said Sirius. “This isn’t the death eaters back again. This is worse. It’s the Aurors. James is going to deal with them because James is the only one of us who can stand up.”

Harry scrabbled.

“Yeah alright. I don’t want to meet them laid out on the floor either.”

Sirius pulled them both to their feet and James steadied them when they nearly toppled over. Harry blinked as he looked out at the street. He tried to rub his eyes but banged the back of his hand against his nose instead.

Then Lowenna was there.

“Here,” she said hurriedly, “drink this quick before those damn blood-hunters start giving you grief.” She handed them each a little purple glass bottle. Sirius had to help Harry make his fingers work and lift the bottle to his lips. The potion tasted of honey and ozone. It stung Harry’s throat and cleared some of the fuzz from his brain. He smiled at Sirius,

“You have really pretty eyes.”
“Thank you Harry,” Sirius was smiling.

“Really pretty. Like the mist when it’s so cold and damp you’re ready to set yourself on fire just to be warm again.”

Sirius laughed, soft as honey against Harry’s raw skin.

“Oh my god,” said James.

“You shush,” said Sirius.

“Fine, you be weirdos together.”

“Hush,” said Lowenna, “the blood-hunters are coming.”

“Lowenna, you can’t keep calling the Aurors blood-hunters,” said James.

“Even if that’s what they are?”

“Sirius and I used to be Aurors.”

“And now you’re not,” she said as if that proved her point. “Now hush.”

There was a crowd gathered at the village end of the street. Rosmerta was there talking to them, with two of the lads helping hold the curious back. Across the street the shop that had been on fire was now a black-edged husk. They’d managed to put the fire out though before it overwhelmed the fire suppression wards of the buildings either side so they stood there absurdly untouched. Some of the villagers who’d been attacked were sitting on the garden chairs, one was laid out across two tables moved together. They were being fussed over by several witches. The three dark-robed bodies had been dragged into a heap by the burned out house.

The two captured death eaters were sitting up in the street watched by a few wary wizards who immediately retreated back to join the crowd as the Aurors started to fan out menacingly across the street. They were all in dark hooded battle dress robes.

“How do you tell them apart from the death eaters?” Harry asked. In the other universe the Aurors wore battle dress robes in camouflage prints. The death eaters rejected such muggle innovations out of hand which made it is easy to tell friend from foe. Before Hermione had the idea, the only way to be sure was to look at their feet. The Hogwarts side wore muggle trainers because they were practical and you didn’t have to worry about keeping a traction spell running while fighting for your life. Death eaters, as suited their high concept tastes, seemed unconcerned about this drawback of their black leather boots.

One time Harry got together with the twins and the three of them cast a mass dispelling hex just before a pitched battle. You could tell who the death eaters were then, they were ones skidding off their feet and landing flat on their backs.

These Aurors all seemed to be keen on the same dark leather boots with stacked heel chic. The lead Auror even had the oddly careful step of someone who had a full platform sole as well as a heel. Unfortunately for him though, as he stalked delicately up to them, it became apparent that he was still shorter than a barefoot James Potter. James heightened the impression by very obviously looking down his nose at him.

Sirius leaned over to Harry and whispered, “Sometimes it comes in handy that Jay is all loom.”
“Rookwood, good of you to show up, finally,” James drawled.

Rookwood had no choice but to look up or be left addressing James’ collar bones. He scowled poisonously about the whole thing.

“Potter, are you responsible for this attack on respectable law-abiding citizens?”

“No, because I’m not a death eater. As proved by two libel trials and one criminal. Would you like to rephrase your question?”

“Who said anything about death eaters? What I see here is a riot in Hogsmeade and an attack on decent hard-working wizards going about their lawful business.”

“At eleven o’clock at night?”

“What can I say, the area’s gone completely downhill.” He looked at Harry. Harry looked back.

“Did you know your mask is on crooked?” he asked.

Rookwood’s hand came up to touch his face and check before he realized what he was doing.

Harry chortled. Rookwood immediately dropped his hand and glared.

“You need to be careful. Your irreverence will have consequences.”

“Wow,” said Harry. “You need to ask Snape for some glaring lessons stat. You’re no good at it at all. Oh. Little better now. But still not a patch on Snape. It’s something about the eyebrows I think. Sirius, do you think it’s the eyebrows?”

Sirius sucked his teeth, “Could be alley cat. Of course Snape also has the full death’s head effect going. I don’t think Rookwood could pull it off, his cheeks are too pudgy.”

“They are a bit aren’t they. Positively cherub-like. Goes with the curls.”

Rookwood, who had turned a an ugly purple, finally lost it and roared,

“One more word out of either of you and I’m arresting you both.”

Harry twirled one finger against his head to indicate, he’s loco. Sirius nodded solemnly and wiped a tear from his eye.

Rookwood growled like an angry bear and turned away to yell at his men.

“Oh what a shame,” said Harry. “Was it something we said.” Sirius kissed him. James shook his head at them.

“Come on,” said Sirius. “He deserved it and you know it, my dear deer.”

“I thought you’d given up that obnoxious habit,” said James. “You haven’t called me that in ages.”

“Dunno, guess I didn’t feel like it.”

James mock-glowered at Harry, “So that’s your fault is it?”

“Hopefully,” said Harry.

“Course it is.” Sirius snuggled into his side. “You make me feel delightfully obnoxious. Let’s go
be obnoxious some more.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Harry agreeably.

“No,” said James. “No absolutely not. I had plans for tonight that did not involve getting you two out of Auror lock-up.”

“Aww,” Sirius whined exaggeratedly.

“Do not pull that face at me. Sit down and – Now what?”

A loud crack of apparition announced another entrance.

Amelia Bones was working her way through another new pile of inane Ministry requirements when Viezel knocked on her door. Viezel, a nervous old man with a shuffling limp who had once been a cocky young man with a dancer’s grace, was one of her sources in the department. Amelia still found it horrifying she required sources in her department but denying there was a problem wasn’t going to help anybody.

“Madam Bones.”

“Yes Viezel?”

“There’s been an attack at Hogsmeade.”

“Death eaters?”

“Yes ma’am. From what Madam Rosmerta was able to tell us it seems they waited until closing time at the Three Broomsticks and then attacked when everyone left.”

“So it was targeted?”

“It would appear so.”

“And the on-call squad have just left.”

“Yes ma’am. And Madam Rosmerta called over half an hour ago.”

She managed to restrain her impulse to curse, and the impulse to demand why Viezel hadn’t contacted her sooner. The poor man needed to keep a low profile, and besides, if he gave himself away he’d become useless for her purposes.

“It’s Daughtry on duty tonight?”

“No ma’am. Watch leader Rookwood relieved him earlier this evening.”

In lieu of swearing she thumped her fist against her desk. That was not a coincidence.

“I’ll leave for Hogsmeade immediately.”

“Ma’am, you should take security with you.” He ducked his head. “We can’t afford to lose you.”

Amelia winced. There was no good replacement if she fell. She’d been scratching around for one since she’d landed the job two years ago after Macmillan was murdered. And an ambush in
Hogsmeade would be easy to blame on the death eaters.

But this was an opportunity to try and root out some of the corruption she knew was in her department but could never pin down. She had to take this chance, or how could she still call herself the Head of the Department. If she was just going to sit around twiddling her thumbs she might as well resign for all the good she was doing.

“And who would you suggest as security Viezel? I don’t need to get cursed in the back. This way I’ll know the enemy. I want you to call Daughtry and his team back. Once I’m sure the situation is secure I’ll want them to relieve Rookwood and handle the aftermath.”

“Very good ma’am. And you won’t be entirely alone. Rosmerta tells me Dear and Darling are there.”

“That makes me feel so much better,” she said sourly.

“Yes ma’am,” he grinned at her.

“Get back to your post,” she scolded.

“Yes ma’am. Luck ma’am.”

“Luck Viezel.”

On balance she decided announcing her presence was the way to go. With the half hour lag, undoubtedly timed deliberately, the death eaters would have left. If she made her presence obvious enough she was unlikely to be murdered in full view of half of Hogsmeade. And if things had reached that point she was unlikely to be able to do anything about it anyway.

She thumped down outside the Three Broomsticks with a loud crack of magic. Looking about she saw her assumption the death eaters had left was correct. She kept her shields up though because she trusted Rookwood not one inch. Her Aurors appeared to be ignoring the two death eater prisoners and focusing on the Hogsmeade residents penned up at one end of street. As she watched, an Auror grabbed a young wizard yanking them out the crowd and shaking them roughly, and now she was looking properly she could see another two Aurors had another resident pinned against a wall.

This, this was worse than she expected. Which was stupid of her. She knew she had death eaters in her department. Why hadn’t she realized they would take the opportunity to harass those they saw as lesser? Just because she’d keep a low profile and clean record if she were a spy did not mean the increasingly confident death eaters would.

“Madam Bones,” said James Potter loudly, announcing her presence to the whole street.

Evidently she had some authority left because the Aurors stepped back from the men they were harassing and shuffled into some sort of order. Rookwood stomped over to her, he was clearly furious at her presence and doing a bad job of hiding it with a tight company smile. He was at least trying to hide it though, so there would be no murder attempt tonight, she had the chance to pull things back.

“Watch Leader Rookwood.”

“Madam Bones.” He twisted his head to one side in a parody of a bowed head. Amelia didn’t bother to call him on it. She had more important things to deal with here.
“Watch Leader Rookwood, what exactly is going on here?”

“Just some trouble at the Three Broomsticks. Nothing for you to concern yourself with ma’am.”

“Exactly how stupid do you think I am? Don’t answer that. Instead tell me how you account for the death eaters? Do you think I can’t see their masks and robes?”

Rookwood kept going, doubling-down on his stupidity, “Just kids fooling around. There was a complete over-reaction by some undesirable elements. I believe they should be brought in for questioning.”

“Are you calling us undesirable, Rookwood?” said Potter, strolling over. “It appears we’re being insulted Sirius.”

“How shocking,” said Black. “And after we went to all that bother of stopping the death eaters burning down Hogsmeade. Of course Rookwood might not be so confused if he had actually got here when Rosmerta called in the attack.”

“I think Rookwood’s probably always confused.”

Rookwood pulled himself up straight. He still wasn’t as tall as Potter. “We arrived at Hogsmeade within the specified time limits ma’am.”

“Oh for Circe’s sake,” said Black, “don’t even try it. You were on call. You should have been here in seconds. James beat you here and he had to stop to get dressed.”

Now Amelia was paying attention she could see Potter was only wearing his muggle jeans with a robe hastily thrown over the top, even his feet were bare. Black was in no better state, in jeans and socks, his naked chest showing off a string of passion bruises worthy of an affectionate vampire. This was going to shred their already tattered reputations.

“Some of us have decorum,” sneered Rookwood, eyeing their state of undress.

Behind them, a young wizard Amelia hadn’t seen before scowled back at Rookwood. He looked wrecked by the attack, grey-faced with smears of blood across his face, his black hair full of soot and dust. His shoulders were rolled forward though, and his green eyes still had fire in them.

He nudged Black with elbow, then stripped off his shabby sweater and handed it over to Black who pulled it on. It didn’t do much to improve Black’s appearance, even if it did make things less scandalous. Black and the muggle grinned at each other, and oh, Amelia had heard a rumour Black had taken up with some random muggle, this must be, Harry wasn’t it. He didn’t look very prepossessing, but he had a solidity wizards tended to lack. And if he hadn’t run screaming at the death eater raid then there must be something to him.

“Some of us are aware that we’re supposed to be saving lives,” said Potter pleasantly.

“Then why there are three dead bodies in the street?” Rookwood scoffed.

“Because a group of death eaters decided to have their fun terrorizing Hogsmeade and we objected. My only regret is that there aren’t more dead.” Potter hitched his robe around himself more tightly then and Amelia wondered at such an obvious tell. “We got Mulciber,” he told Amelia, “along with Julian Flint and Andras Rosier. The prisoners are Octavian Yaxley and Gavan Selwyn.”

“Mulciber, huh.” That was news. He’d been on the not proven list for a long time. The other names she didn’t recognize, though she knew the families of course. She had the idea they were all young.
This had probably been a training mission. Her fists clenched.

“...must object,” said Rookwood. “Potter’s hated Mulciber since school...”

“...and obviously took the opportunity to revenge his grudges in the confusion. Mr Mulciber is a respectable member of our community and his family will demand reparations for his death.”

“They can try,” said Black’s muggle. “But since all I own is what I’m standing in, they could have a problem with that.”

“You killed Mulciber?” hissed Rookwood.

“You. Because he crucio’d Sirius. And also because he attacked Hogsmeade. But mostly cause he crucio’d Sirius.” He grinned sharply.

“Then you are under arrest for his murder.”

“You stay the hell away from Harry,” Black snapped back, dragging his muggle in close to side.

“Stop,” screeched one of the death eater prisoners. “Stop, just stop.”

“Selwyn, shut the hell up,” demanded the other, Yaxley, trying to swing his bound legs around to strike at his one-time friend.

“You shut up. Everyone shut up.”

Amelia grabbed Rookwood’s sleeve and glared him silent as he moved to intervene. Potter stepped across to loom over the Auror squad, Black and his Harry simply picked Yaxley up like a roll of carpet and slung him further along the street.

Selwyn kept shrieking, “Stop pretending. Everyone knows we’re death eaters. We came here and we hurt people. Don’t you get that Tav? One of us nearly killed Bethan. Bethan! We flirted with her every time we went to the pub. You went to the pub to flirt with her. And then we tried to kill her.” He stopped chest heaving like he’d been running for his life, then said quietly,

“I didn’t sign up for that. I don’t even know what I did sign up for anymore. It wasn’t for this. We say we’re better than mudbloods and then we do this.”

“You saying a mudblood bastard like Cooper is better than us?” yelled Yaxley.

“He’s foul and disrespectful and I cannot stand him. But he’s never tried to disembowel a friend, has he?”

“Bethan isn’t a friend, she’s just another stuck-up bitch. We’re better than them. We’re better than all of them.”

“How can you say that? I’m sorry Professor Black. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. You were right.” Selwyn broke down into noisy whooping tears.

“Oh bloody hell,” said Black. He walked back, and swung himself down to sit cross-legged in front of Selwyn, “Gavan, calm down. It’s, well to be honest you’re completely fucked but wailing about it isn’t going to help.”

Across the street Potter face-palmed hard; but Selwyn giggled hysterically.
“Tell it like it is, Professor B.”

“I don’t lie to you little idiots. For Merlin’s sake, Gavan, why?”

“I don’t know why. Because the mud–”

Black coughed.

“No even now?”

Black folded his arms.

“Oh fine, the muggle-borns, they’re so superior, so convinced they know everything. Talking about finding the roots of magic in genes, whatever the hell those are. Telling us our ceremonies are just wishful thinking.”

Black shrugged his shoulders, “I feel sorry for them actually. They have all this wonder in front of them and all they do is look for the trick.”

“You feel sorry for everybody,” muttered Selwyn.

“Which is working out pretty good for you right now. I am sorry Gavan. I’m sorry I couldn’t figure out the right words to stop you.”

“I don’t think there were any right words. I was just so angry. I was an idiot.”

“You’re kind of being an idiot right now. They’re not going to forgive you for this.”

Selwyn looked up at Rookwood and shuddered. “I know,” he said quietly. “But I don’t care. It was too late for me the moment I took the mark. But I’m not going to let them blame you for this. Not when you tried to help me. And you have to do something for me. You have to tell my sister she can’t marry Christopher Nott. It doesn’t matter how sweet he is to her, he’s done terrible things. He doesn’t deserve to even be in the same room as Iona.”

“I’ll tell her, but my record on getting Selwyns to listen to me is not great.”

Selwyn flinched.

Black clutched his hair with his hands and stared up at the night sky. Then sagged back into a heap and looked at Selwyn.

“Look, here’s what I’ll do. You give me any messages you want me to deliver and I’ll let them see the memory in a pensieve.”

“Sirius,” Potter growled.

“What am I supposed to do?” Black turned back to Selwyn. “Okay?”

“Thank you, thank you so much.”

That was something Amelia needed to put a stop to, direct transfer of information to other parties could not be allowed. She started forward but Potter quickly caught up with her,

“Leave them be. Let him pass on his goodbyes. He’ll be dead by tomorrow morning.”

“No, he’s going to secure holding cells. If his family want to visit him there under monitored
conditions they can do so.”

Potter rolled his eyes, “C’mon, you can’t possibly believe that. The way Rookwood’s glaring at him he’ll be lucky to get back to Headquarters before an accidental wand discharge gets him.”

Glancing at Rookwood, she saw that he was talking to two of his men with black looks at the death eater traitor.

“I’m not quite that naïve, Auror 1st Class Potter.”

He laughed at his old rank.

“I’m having Rookwood replaced by Daughtry just as soon as I get to the floo.”

He shook his head at her, “And you think that will make a difference?”

“No. The corruption runs that deep?”

“Everyone knows you’re fair, Amelia, but you have got to get out of your office. Scrimgeour –”

“I’ll not believe he’s sold out.”

“No, but Scrimgeour is a good traditional Auror. Does things the solid traditional way. Keeps the standards up. Protects the dignity of the office at all costs.”

Amelia recognized the quotes because she’d heard them all before. She might have fallen for them herself once, but one of the standards those good traditional Aurors kept up was no women on the front lines. Having fought her way past that one, she was no longer prepared to accept fitting up the obvious culprit because the evidence didn’t match, or crucioing a confession out of the obvious guilty party. And after all of that, there was no possibility she’d ever accept the good old traditional view that no Auror could be wrong.

“He’s one of those.”

“Madam, all the ones who aren’t death eaters are one of those.”

“But.”

“You came here tonight without anyone to back you up. That means you don’t have anyone you can trust to back you up. You don’t have any of your people left. I knew you as a Watch Leader, and I’m sure you were equally fair as Head of the Auror Department. I’m also sure Scrimgeour wasn’t your selection for your replacement, and whoever you would have chosen left shortly afterwards.”

“Yes, Michael Easton. He was a muggle-born, there was a good opportunity in America, so he took it. You’re telling me he was forced out. Why wouldn’t he say,” she rubbed her hand over her face suddenly feeling very old. “Don’t answer that. He didn’t tell me because I couldn’t protect him. I made that clear when I couldn’t get him in as Head Auror. Am I even in charge of my own department Potter?”

He shrugged his shoulders, unbothered by the revelation that had struck her like a blinding light, because he’d always known.

“You’re famous for being fair Madam. Perhaps a little too fair, a little too impartial on the death eaters, forgotten how things are at the coal face. They’re doing you a favour keeping things
“running as they should be.”

“So that’s a no then.”

“You were promoted too fast. Couldn’t get enough of your people in place before Scrimgeour started levering them out. You can only work with what you’re given.”

“So how exactly do you know more about my department than I do, Potter?”

“I’m a lot sneakier than I let on.”

Amelia flashed through the amount of sneakiness Potter had displayed in his brief career as an Auror, “I’m not sure that’s physically possible.”

He grinned all teeth. Amelia was suddenly reminded of Black’s muggle. They both had the same feeling of snakes coiled ready to strike.

“As you say Madam.”

“I asked the wrong question,” she admitted. “Why do you know so much about my department?”

“I’ve been keeping Sirius out of Azkaban for nearly fifteen years. You think that was as simple as pointing out he hasn’t actually committed a crime.”

Amelia winced. The one thing that united the two sides in this war was a common detestation of Sirius Black. She was fairly sure one thing they could co-operate on was getting the man locked up and throwing away the key.

She glanced over at him, he was still sitting in front of Selwyn, holding the boy’s hands as he tried to get through his goodbyes.

Looking back at Potter she saw he was watching his best friend, fondness scrawled all over his face. Then he caught her gaze and carefully tucked the emotion away.

“The Black votes in the Wizengamot are the one thing keeping the situation in a holding pattern.”

“I know,” said Potter. “And later we’re going to have a long talk about that because a single point of failure between government and despotism is ridiculous.”

Amelia decided that was definitely for later, they had to stave off the despotism first, “So I can understand why you two would keep a low profile since you-know-who returned. What I don’t understand is why you’re taking a risk now?”

“Well, one, the situation has gone on long enough and we’re approaching the endgame. And, two, if they get past me now, before they can get to Sirius they’re going to have to go through Harry.”

“Harry?” She looked at the muggle, who was leaning against the wall near Black watching him with, well okay she was going to have to apologise to Susan, heart eyes were clearly a thing. He realized he was being watched almost immediately, head snapping around, hand drifting to his wand which was – holstered in a large patch sewn onto his jeans. “You couldn’t buy the man a decent holster?”

“You haven’t seen how fast that wand jumps into his hand. You don’t mess with what works.”

“And you think Harry can, what? Keep the whole wizarding world at bay?”
“I think Harry’s nearly as ruthless as I am. I can’t wait to see him keep the whole wizarding world at bay.”

There was a sudden scuffle and before Amelia could work out what was going on the Yaxley boy broke away from the Aurors who were supposed to be restraining him and yelled,

“Crucio!”

And Black was screaming.

Harry spun on his toes, ran a step towards Yaxley, then vanished with a crack of apparition, reappearing directly in front of Yaxley, his momentum carrying him forward and slamming Yaxley into the wall. There was a second loud crack and Harry dropped him. Yaxley fell to the ground, head flopping, neck clearly broken.

Harry was already back beside Sirius.

“And that was right in front of you,” said Potter. “Still think Selwyn will survive the night?”

Amelia swore. That had been blatant. Also the speed of Harry’s response to the attack was exceptional.

“Do you think Harry –?”

“Oh no,” said Potter. “You’re not recruiting Harry. The Aurors threw Sirius out, Harry won’t have anything to do with them. Unless,” he tilted his head consideringly, “he might sign up to make you lives miserable for a few months, but I really wouldn’t recommend it.”

Harry had eased Sirius up into his lap and was cooing over him, his voice a rumbling half-broken purr.

Rookwood was storming up to the pair.

Amelia moved forward ready to intervene, but Potter caught her elbow.

“Just watch.”

“You’re under arrest,” Rookwood shouted. Harry ignored him, raising one shoulder and turning away from him. Rookwood grabbed for the shoulder. As he slammed his hand down, Harry’s magic aura was briefly visible, crystalline and almost solid. Rookwood’s hand smacked straight into it, and then he was yanking his hand away and clutching it to his chest while he yelled and cussed.

“Rookwood!” Amelia called. “Your behaviour is rapidly becoming inappropriate.”

“Did you not see what that muggle did?”

“I saw you try and grab a member of the public, that is not acceptable.”

“You can’t be defending him. He needs to be locked up immediately, and Black. The death eaters were heard calling him a traitor who had betrayed their lord. He’s clearly a death eater.”

“Excuse me sir but that is not correct,” said the stiff older gentleman who had been watching Yaxley before the Aurors took over. “The death eaters were angry that Black set up the wards that stopped them attacking the Three Broomsticks. That’s what we all heard, wasn’t it?” he addressed the gathered crowd and got a series of yes and agreeing murmurs in reply.
“They’re lying,” Rookwood accused.

“Rookwood, as you weren’t actually here at that point,” said Potter. “I’m not sure why you think you get to have an opinion. And Madam Bones isn’t going to let you beat anyone into agreeing with you. I suggest you go home and start working on your grovelling. I’m sure your dark lord is going to require some.”

“You can’t speak to me like that.”

Amelia sighed, “Rookwood, when you’re in as deep as you are, you should just stop digging. Go back to Headquarters with your squad and send me Daughtry and his. Then you can take yourself home and write up a report of tonight’s debacle explaining exactly why it took you so long to get here, and how your training regime is so bad a teenage death eater somehow escaped your men’s custody. No, this is not up for debate. Go now.”

Rookwood stalked away.

Amelia only saw it because she’d turned to study Black’s muggle as she tried to decide what to do with him. As she watched Harry pointed his right forefinger like a child’s idea of a wand. He aimed it at Rookwood’s feet and his lips moved briefly. The next step Rookwood took his feet skidded out from under him and he slammed down flat on his back.

“Oh my god,” said Potter. “He’s a more of a menace than Pads. I did not believe that was possible.”

“I’m going to have to arrest him you realize. He killed Yaxley.”

“And have fun proving that.”

“I didn’t say he’d be charged with murder. But a man is dead. When Daughtry gets here he’ll take Harry into temporary custody.”

“Xcuse me ma’am,” said the older gentleman, “but you can’t arrest the lad. Not for defending his young man. What’s the world coming to if you can’t defend your family?”

“He killed a man.”

“He didn’t even draw his wand. He just pushed him out the way and the death eater fell wrong.”

There was a swell of agreement from the crowd.

Amelia rubbed her forehead, “We cannot decide justice with a popularity contest.”

Potter coughed, “Kinda the definition of trial by Wizengamot.”

Her headache grew worse. “There still should be a trial.”

“Yeah,” agreed Potter, “Harry can stand trial for shoving Yaxley out the way to stop him crucioing Sirius; after you try those idiots for letting Yaxley escape in the first place.”

“Potter.”

“Look, you don’t want to decide now. Fine. I agree. There should be an investigation. But you don’t need to arrest Harry for that. You shouldn’t arrest Harry for that.”

“Absolutely,” the older gentleman said. “He helped drive off the death eaters and he saved Bethan.
We’re not going to let you drag Harry off just so you can beat him into accepting the blame for everything.”

“That is not what would happen,” said Amelia, outraged at the mere suggestion. That was greeted with weary disbelief by the crowd.

“No it probably wouldn’t be,” said Potter. “I can’t imagine anyone successfully beating Harry into anything.”

That even Potter, who’d been one of her Aurors, accepted that Harry would inevitably be assaulted in Auror custody broke her heart. It was time to do something about this.

“Alright. There will be an investigation but I see no need to take Harry into custody at this point. As long as he agrees to remain at Hogsmeade.”

“Where’s he going to go?” Potter asked, pointing at the tightly meshed huddle of Harry and Black.

“Right. Daughtry should be here, I’m going to brief him. Potter I’ll keep you up to date with the investigation but –” she broke off. She didn’t doubt for a second that Harry had deliberately killed Yaxley, but given the circumstances… and as Potter had pointed out, proving it would be near impossible. She doubted Yaxley’s family would pursue the matter either. They’d want things kept as quiet as possible.

“Thank you Madam Bones.”

“Alright then. You should get them off the street before Daughtry gets here.”

“Will do.” He nodded his head to her and stepped aside to go and crouch down by his friends.

Amelia waited a few moments for the focus of the crowd to shift away to their own concerns. Then she walked over to them.

“Madam?” asked Potter, puzzled. Black cringed and attempted to sit up. Harry shifted to help him, watching her with wary eyes.

“You have an appointment with me tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“To discuss –?”

“How things are proceeding in the fight against you-know-who. What sort of assistance I could offer.” He waved his hands as if disclaiming any ideas at all and exchanged an uneasy glance with Black.

“You could offer. Not you and Black?”

“I was dishonourably discharged from the Aurors,” said Black. “I wouldn’t interfere. James and I don’t really associate anymore.”

That was such a brazen blaring lie that Amelia wonder how he could say the words without his tongue falling out. She looked down at all three of them. Harry was cautious, poised behind Black ready to react with him. Potter was wary, edging defensively ahead of his friend. Black looked resigned, defeat in his grey eyes.

She clicked her own tongue in annoyance, “Maybe you can fool Dumbledore’s precious little secret
team, though Merlin alone knows how, but I worked with you for three years. Don’t even try and pull the wool over my eyes.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Black cautiously. He still looked resigned.

Amelia smiled tightly. She imagined he’d had his concern and opinions throw back in his face more times than he could count. But Amelia wasn’t one of those foolish people. She might not have the full story but she was prepared to take her cue from Potter. She had no support within the Auror squads, so she’d have to look outside the department. And why not call upon two of her old Auror squad. There could be nothing wrong with that.

“I’m talking about the fact at the meeting in my office tomorrow, I expect to see both Dear and Darling.”

Potter groaned and covered his face with his hands, “Must you.”

Black looked stunned for a moment, then squinted at her as if trying to work if she meant it. She knelt down on one knee and placed her hands over his still shaky ones.

“Mr Black, I am not in the habit of prosecuting victims for the crimes of their attackers. So I expect to see you both, Dear and Darling,” she added deliberately and was pleased to coax a rusty chuckle out of Black.

“I’m surrounded by obnoxious people,” Potter complained, although he was smiling at her. Amelia patted him on the shoulder as she regained her feet because she remembered where the codenames came from.

(When the trainees graduated to full Auror status, they took them out for the drinks, obviously, and gave them the next day off. The next day when they chose codenames for their new prey, sorry Aurors 2nd Class. If their hungover little fledges had any sense they’d be sitting there miserable as sin as they were tormented with all the worst possibilities before something marginally bearable was selected. If they didn’t they usually got stuck with the worst their elders and betters could think up.

Potter and Black did not make it in, which had surprised Amelia because she figured they were the cautious sort, and if Black wasn’t careful he’d get stuck with something truly dreadful relating to his family and his deviancy. So they were arguing about it good-naturedly, and maybe a little sharply in the case of Smudge who hated purebloods in general and noble ones in particular, and Amelia was trying to veto the worst options without being too obvious about it, when someone knocked on the squad room door. Peeking around the door was a beautiful redhead with bright green eyes, Lily Potter grinned impishly at them.

“I understand this is the important decision day.”

“Oh, yes Mrs Potter.”

“Oh Lily, please. And the names go up there?” She pointed at the board listing off their names with two empty spaces for their new fledges.

“Yes ma’am.”

“May I?” she drew her wand and pointed it at the board. Amelia nodded because it was polite, because it would be easy to change afterwards, and mostly because she was curious as hell. From the avid looks of her squad they felt the same way.
Carefully Lily spelt out *Dear* and *Darling*.

Smudge cackled with laughter, “That’s absolutely perfect.”

“I thought so,” said Lily, before vanishing as quickly as she had appeared.

It was perfect. They had all noticed the affected way Black called Potter, my dear, and even more ridiculously, my dear dear, when feeling particularly mirthful as if he’d stepped straight out of the eighteenth century. They’d also noticed the way Potter always looked like he wanted to strangle him when he did.

Potter and Black staggered in minutes later.

“Sorry,” Potter apologized, “our alarm charms got cancelled somehow.”

“Oh,” said Amelia, personally suspecting a mischievous redhead. “Don’t worry. We’ve already sorted the main business of the day.”

Two horror-filled faces met hers.

“What did you –?” Potter’s eyes fell on the board. “Sirius, I really am going to murder you this time.”

“Me, I didn’t do anything. This is not my fault.”

“Well it’s not mine. So if it wasn’t you, who was –”

They stared at each other, as they both said, “Lily!” grabbed each other’s arms and vanished in an explosion of apparition.

“What do you bet they just splinched themselves?” Smudge asked, and then everyone was collapsed in laughter again.

Amelia decided to use the ‘checking they haven’t splinched themselves’ as an excuse to check up on them at Potter’s house. It wouldn’t necessarily occur to her squad but purebloods weren’t know for taking being mocked by their wives with any kind of grace. Amelia didn’t want to think anything like that, but Lily Potter was a muggle-born with no family support. And there were reasons a man who could have his pick of witches might chose a penniless muggle-born with no family to take issue with her treatment at her husband’s hands.

The Potters lived in a smart little house in Edmonton. Amelia knocked at the door.

“Coming,” called a woman’s voice. “Just one moment.”

Amelia tapped her foot against the paving stones.

Lily Potter opened the door and smiled at her, “Madam Bones how lovely to see you. Sirius, please don’t curse your boss in the back.”

“What?” said Black from behind her. “You think it might affect my performance review?”

Amelia turned around, “How did you –?” He’d soundlessly apparated behind her, that was impressive, and potentially useful. “How did you apparate? There are wards up, I can feel them.”

“Yeah but they don’t affect us, what would be the point of that,” said Black, as if conditional apparition wards were something you could just pull out of a hat.
“Would you like to come in,” Lily offered. Potter had stepped out from wherever he’d been lurking to join her.

“No, no, I was just coming to check no one had splinched themselves.”

“They’re fine,” said Lily. “Although there was some shrieking. Sirius has a dramatic streak. You may have noticed.”

“Hey,” said Black, slouching against the wall in his leather jacket looking moody and yes dramatic.

“You know we love you,” said Lily, “even if you are dramatic. Now stop hanging around like an extra in a James Dean movie and convince your boss to join us for brunch.”

“No truly,” she backed away from the door. “I have other errands. It was nice to meet you formally Mrs Potter.”

“Oh don’t take her on her company manners,” said Potter. “She’s much more herself sneaking around being a genius.” He beamed at his wife with so much love and pride that Amelia had to blink. Potter, she realized, had been perfectly aware of some of the other options Black had nearly been landed with and that Lily’s suggestion had saved them from.

“Ignore them,” said Black, “they can stay like that for hours. It’s nauseating.”

“Shut it you,” Potter reached out a hand to drag him inside.

“Thank you for volunteering to do the washing up,” said Lily.

“How is it my best friend got married and I’m the one being hen-pecked,” Black whined.

“Your life is very hard,” Lily agreed. She patted him consolingly on the back as he pretended to collapse all over her.

“And now I’m an Auror as well. I might actually end up being a contributing member of society. My family would disown me if they hadn’t already. This is all your fault Prongs.”

“How is it my fault?”

“You were the one who wanted to be an Auror, that meant one of us had to join up as well to keep an eye on you.” He winked at Amelia. “Me and Lily arm-wrestled for the privilege,” he told her so earnestly she actually believed him for a second.

“Sirius lost,” said Lily.

“Because you’re a rotten cheater.”

“Actually I am a really good cheater.”

“Fraid I have to agree with Lily here,” said James. “She is an excellent cheater.”

“Thank you my dear,” said Lily.

“Who’s picking up your bad habits,” he scowled direfully.

Sirius raised one hand and Lily smacked her palm against it in celebration.

Amelia shook her head at them and their ridiculousness. “So I’ll see Dear and Darling at six
o’clock tomorrow then.”

“Yes ma’am,” they said brightly. The door closed but she could still hear them.

“Oh my god,” said Potter. “Lily did you have to.”

“It’s alright for you,” said Black. “At least yours is ironic.”

“I think they’re very sweet,” said Lily. “And precious. And – No slobbering! No slobbering! I give!”

The loud triumphant barking of a dog cut her off, and then she was yelling, “Not in the house, not in the house. If you yank that lampshade off one more time James Potter, so help me. Outside the pair of you. No I am not – fine okay I’ll come too. Do you think we should get Darling a coll– No slobbering! Ugh! Ugh! You’re both impossible. No that is not a good thing. Dear and Darling.” And then she was laughing, a light ripple, with a deeper male chuckle and even the barking dog sounded like he was laughing.

Amelia thought about that happy little house and decided she didn’t care what anybody else thought, nobody could hate you-know-who more than the two survivors.
Harry watched Amelia Bones convince Sirius to come with James to the meeting and was glad to see that at least a few people had some sense. It was clearly important to Sirius so he stayed quiet but Harry was pretty much done with the wizarding world for the moment. Sirius was still twitching from the crucio and it was visibly getting worse. All Harry wanted was to scoop him up and tuck him into bed where he’d be safe. James could deal with the rest of the world until tomorrow.

Once Bones finally stepped back, Harry tilted his head questioningly at James.

“Merlin yes,” said James. “Get him inside. Call me if anyone bothers you.”

Sirius didn’t object to being talked over which meant he must be feeling awful. James’ face stiffened and he flicked his hand at Harry telling him to hurry up.

Harry crouched down and pulled Sirius up into his arms. With a wobbly little boost of magic he stood up.

“I can walk,” Sirius protested without making any effort to take his own weight. It was like carrying a sack of potatoes.

“And I can carry you,” said Harry. “Please let me. I was so scared for you.”

“I’m sorry,” said Sirius, and Harry had to swallow down a desperate lashing fury that Sirius would apologize for being tortured. Sirius did stop arguing though and flopped his arms around Harry’s shoulders in a pitiful attempt at holding on. Harry wanted to kill Mulciber and Yaxley all over again. Sirius pressed his face against Harry’s neck, the shakes convulsing through him were growing stronger. Harry hitched Sirius closer and held him tight as he carried him into the Three Broomsticks.

He must have been looking dour because Rosmerta winced when she saw him,

“Harry?” she called questioningly.

“Yes,” he said as pleasantly as he could manage.

“Lowenna gave me a Salvus potion for Sirius. I’m going to tuck it in your pocket, okay? Do you know how to use it?”

“Yes,” said Harry shortly because he did not want to discuss this.
“I had a nasty feeling you did. Give it to Sirius when you’re in your room.”

“Thank you.”

“Uh, about your room. The ladder will be too much for Sirius. Do you want to take one of the bedrooms instead?”

“No. No I want our room. Can you get someone to open the hatch for me?”

Roscimta glanced around and then called for a Keegan. One of the lads came over and scurried up the ladder and popped the hatch.

“Uh, I can give you had with a hand with him.”

“No thank you,” said Harry tightly. He wasn’t having anyone else touching Sirius tonight.

“Harry,” Roscimta plucked nervously at the air beside him. “Lowenna told me Sirius shouldn’t apparate.”

“I know.” After a crucio the squinching effect of apparition was like a thousand fire ants crawling across your skin. Harry would never put Sirius through that. Once Keegan was out the way, he simply gritted his teeth, pulled together the ragged shreds of his magic and floated them both straight up through the hatch.

“Whoa,” said Keegan. Harry ignored him. It wasn’t flying like Riddle anyway. It was floating. That was completely different.

Up in the loft, he stepped across on to the floor, and kicked the loft hatch shut. He pointed his finger at the hatch, it would have been easier with his wand but he didn’t have a hand free, and sketched a messy combination of alarm and protection wards. He hoped people would have the sense to knock because it shouldn’t be lethal but he wasn’t in the best mood and he couldn’t swear there wouldn’t be at least a lost hand or two.

Satisfied they were finally secure, he carried Sirius across to the mattress and knelt to lay him down, helping him to curl up to ease the cramping.

“Sorry,” Sirius muttered as he fumbled. “I’m not normally this useless after a few minutes of crucio.”

Harry ground his teeth. That would be because Sirius got proper treatment straight away instead of having to talk a boy through his deathbed goodbyes. Helping Selwyn be brave would have knocked Sirius off-balance regardless, with crucio still running through his body they were lucky he hadn’t keeled over altogether. It was no wonder the crucio was getting worse with Sirius’ misery amplifying its effects.

“It’s not a problem,” he said quietly. “I got you.”

“Yeah,” Sirius smiled up at him. “You got me.”

Harry had to close his eyes for a couple of seconds. The intense need to stop Sirius being hurt ever again was almost overwhelming. A hand crept into his, and Harry managed to get his eyes back open.

“Harry?”
He couldn’t even manage to say it was okay because it wasn’t.

“Hey,” he said and had to blink hard against the tears suddenly welling in his eyes. Frustrated beyond bearing with himself, he scraped his nails across the back of his opposite hand and with the sharp burn of it to steady him he managed to get things back under his control.

“I’ve got some Salvus,” he said.

“Yick, it makes my magic go all shaky.”

“That’s okay,” said Harry. “I got you.”

He pulled the little glass bottle from his pocket. It was glowing inky blue and when he sniffed it to check it smelt reassuringly of cinnamon apples. Tucking himself under Sirius he helped him sit up enough that he wouldn’t choke while he slowly sipped the potion.

The involuntarily shaking increased and Sirius began to lose any control of his body’s movements. Harry had been expecting that. He shifted Sirius on to his side and encouraged him to stretch out his arms and legs. He massaged his hands up and down the juddering limbs and tried to ease out the cramps as the Salvus encouraged Sirius’ body to purge the remaining effects of the crucio.

When Sirius’ breathing began to snag, Harry crawled onto the mattress and sat down with his back against the wall, pulling Sirius up into a sitting position with his back against Harry’s chest. He rubbed his hands up and down his quaking rib cage. Sirius’ magic was beginning to hiss and spit in his distress.

“Sorry,” Sirius gasped. He tried to sit up away from Harry but he wasn’t strong enough, collapsing back against him as another shudder tore through him.

“Don’t be foolish. You can’t control it any more than you can stop yourself shaking.”

It did sting though, so Harry let his own magic flare and settle on his skin. He blew onto the palms of hands feeling the magic pool there, then with his hand about an inch above Sirius’ skin, he smoothed the magic over him.

“Oh that’s nice,” Sirius sighed. “Sorry I’m being such a wuss about this.”

“I’m letting it go because your mind’s obviously as frazzled as the rest of you but just because you can pick yourself up and keep fighting after crucio is no reason to do so when there’s no need. The damage has to come out at some point.”

After one particularly hectic month, once they dosed him with Salvus Harry’s entire body had locked up in one massive cramp and they had to full-body bind him to stop him snapping his own bones.

“You’re just like Jay. If you’d given me a couple of minutes I would have got myself back under control and you could have least got some sleep before doing this.”

Harry decided to ignore those last comments for the sake of his own sanity, “Yes, because James has some sense. It gets worse the longer you leave it, you idiot. What would you say if it was me that was crucioed?”

Sirius managed a weak chuckle. “Point.”

“Exactly. Are you feeling a bit better?”
“Much.” Sirius shook his arms out dispersing more of the remaining cruciatus.

“Good.” Harry kept smoothing until all the traces of the tainted magic had been eased away. He looked at Sirius, who smiled wearily at him,

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” Harry tried to force down his sudden anger, not sure where it had even come from. “I just want you to feel better.”

“I can tell.” Sirius caught his hand in both of his.

Harry flinched. Like casting the curse in the first place, to heal cruciatus required you to truly want to help. So the people who did the best were either genuinely dedicated healers, or, well… And he wasn’t sure he wanted to have given himself away like that. He knew he was better at actions than words, but words were important, everyone said that. He wanted Sirius to have the words. So he shouldn’t be going around saying it with actions if he wasn’t going to say the words.

He smacked himself over the back of the head in pure frustration, “It was nothing.”

“It was not nothing. But do you want to know what would make me feel even better?”

Harry nodded eagerly. He hoped it involved killing someone. Preferably several someones. He could bring Sirius their heads. The last few hours had convinced him that heads would make an excellent gifts.

“Getting out of these clothes and curling up in bed. Hopefully with you to keep me warm.”

Harry’s temper would have preferred the killing people option but the rest of him was on board and even his temper softened when Sirius blinked tiredly at him,

“We can definitely do that,” he promised.

He helped Sirius kick off his jeans and wriggle out of his sweater, then stripped off his own clothes. Then he slid them down the bed and pulled the covers up over them. Sirius wrapped himself around his knees and Harry made sure the blankets were tucked in around him then curled himself around the Sirius ball. Sirius sighed and settled heavily against him. Harry kissed the curve of his ear,

“I am never going to let you get hurt again,” he whispered but even as he said it he knew it was a lie. He wanted to weep with frustration. Instead he closed his eyes and let himself sink down into the rumbling magic of the wards, coiling with them around the building to keep out all intruders.

The tap, tap of a beak against the tiny dormer window woke Harry. He crawled out of bed and shuffled along to let the large snowy owl in. Hedwig preked at him.

“Hey girl,” She hopped inside and onto his shoulder so she could preen his hair while he untangled the note from her leg. “You staying for a while?”

She swivled her head at him, fluttered off his shoulder, and took wing. He watched her go, he missed Hedwig.

Sirius rolled over, pulling the covers back so just his mess of black hair showed,
“Was that Hedwig?”

“Yes.”

“So it’s happened then?”

Harry checked the note. It was only two lines.

“Yes,” he said again. “Selwyn was found hanging in his cell. The two Aurors who were supposed to be watching him are on report.”

“What does it say who?”

“Francis Nott and Leonard Yaxley.”

“Well they’ll never get them on murder. The head of Selwyn’s family is his great-uncle, he’s not going to make a fuss about a disappointing nephew when things could still go either way. But Bones should be able to lever them out the Aurors so that’s something.”

“I guess.” Harry had never quite adjusted to the wizarding system where everything depended on your connections and your ability to use them. He found it frustratingly malleable despite the fact there seemed to be some cast iron rules at the bottom of it all.

Anyone at Hogwarts who’d been brought up wizard was able to reel off ancestries and marriages like a talking encyclopaedia. Muggle-raised were always racing to catch up. Even Ron, who was as politically unastute as you could get, would say things like, you don’t want to mess with him mate, about some obscure third year student all elbows and knees, his sister's married to Augustus Carrow and he’s mental on the duelling field. Hermione had eventually lost all patience and sat down to make a database of everyone who was anyone in the wizarding world but even with her database she still couldn’t rattle off the competing influences in a situation the way the littlest Slytherin pureblood could without even thinking.

Sirius turned over twice, burying deeper into the covers, then abruptly flung them back. He sat up, running his hands through his hair so that it flopped over his face.

“I’m going to get some breakfast.”

“Sure,” said Harry, pretending to not to notice the way Sirius was skittering away from him. There was no reason to force him to talk about it. It wasn’t going to make anything better. Selwyn would still have been murdered in his holding cell. Harry wasn’t as sorry about it as Sirius but there was no reason to say that, or point out Selwyn had never lost his hatred for muggle-borns. Sirius already knew all that. It didn’t soften the loss.

Harry remembered when they found Jon Hodges’ body left behind after a death eater raid dark mark on his wrist. Harry hadn’t even liked Hodges – he’d been in the year below Ginny, thought he was something special and enjoyed throwing his weight around – but it still felt like a loss to see him dead. Even worse was knowing that the death of an enemy wasn’t something you’d change even if you could. Harry definitely wasn’t talking about that with Sirius, it was hard enough knowing it was true without being forced to admit it out loud.

And Sirius was an idiot who was undoubtedly sorry for all the losses, even Octavian Yaxley.

Harry watched Sirius vanish out the loft hatch. He was going to tear Riddle into scraps of dying magic and toss the remnants to the winds. It was time to talk with James. There was a lot of knowledge from that other universe that might be useful and certainly should be shared.
First though, he glanced down at the book on Animagus magic. It sat on top of the desk next to the sunflower Sirius had made him. Harry brushed his fingers across the soft petals.

Harry liked flying, he did. He didn’t understand his resistance to becoming the Order’s hooded hawk again. There were only a couple of likely locations for Riddle to be hiding, aerial reconnaissance was the quick, low-risk method of finding out. Harry could just suck up his reluctance and get on with it.

He opened the window as far as it would go and set the latch. Leaning out into the cold morning air, he shivered. Retreating back to the desk, he laid his hand over the book Sirius had given him, then reached down inside him to yank out the underside of his soul. Shrinking and twisting back into himself, he leapt gracefully into air.

And landed in a heap on the floor with a thud and an outraged yowl.

Trying to sort out his extra legs and no wings he got himself hopelessly tangled and shrieked in frustration.

“Harry?” Sirius’ head popped out the attic hatch. “What’s – Harry? Harry, is that you?”

Harry mewed pathetically.

“Oh Harry, you would be an over-achiever with this too. Are you alright?”

That was stupid question. Harry yowled. He tried to move his front limbs but they weren’t wings and they weren’t arms and this wasn’t fair-r-r.

Sirius laughed.

That definitely wasn’t fair. Harry tried to swipe with a paw and rolled himself over.

“Oh Harry. I’m sorry for laughing,” Sirius still sounded amused though as he scrambled up into the loft. “But you’re just like Jay his first time out. Those legs not listening to you, huh.” And then Sirius’ big careful hands were picking up his confusing body and holding him while Harry figured out his four legs and paws.

“Mow-yoww,” said Harry and swiped at Sirius’ hand with his paw. Ha, he’d got it figured out.

Sirius laughed again.

“Way more vicious than Jay though.” He lifted Harry up, and Harry wasn’t sure if he liked this, then he was being held against Sirius’ chest and one hand was stroking firmly over his fur, and okay, Harry could put up with this.

“That better huh? You got your fur all ruffled didn’t you, you little menace, yes you did.” Sirius was cooing at him. Harry hissed in disgust. He might put up with the petting (maybe even liked it not that he was admitting that anytime soon, or ever) but he was not dealing with cooing.

He tensed his paw, and success, claws! He latched his claws into Sirius hand.

“Aw, and such adorable itty bitty claws.” Sirius snuggled him closer. Harry hissed in irritation. “Oh sorry,” Sirius did not sound sorry, he sounded like he was laughing. “I meant to say what fierce tough claws you have, I’m positively quivering in my boots.”

Harry latched on with both sets of claws. Sirius carefully unpicked them from his skin, rubbing Harry’s face consolingly as he did so.
“I’m sorry Harry.” He rubbed his cheek against the top of Harry’s head in apology. “But you are adorable, and when you’re like this there’s absolutely no hiding it.”

Harry would have liked to keep on being offended by this but Sirius’ crafty fingers were itching around his ears and that was so nice he couldn’t manage much more than being a puddle of happy cat. This was definitely not fair, nice, but not fair.

When he was thoroughly relaxed, Sirius sat down on the chair and set him on his lap, “You ready to have a look at yourself?”

“Merp?”

“Okay then.” Sirius swirled his hand around in a circle just in front of Harry and a silvery mirror appeared. Curious, Harry peered at his reflection, and meeped.

He wasn’t anything special when it came to looks, unless he deliberately let his magic flare which tended to draw in anybody with the least trace of magic in their blood (and made muggles jumpy). From Sirius’ reaction though he’d been hoping he’d managed cute as a cat. Really how could you not have a cute cat.

Harry was not a cute cat. His body and legs weren’t quite in proportion and his tail kinked sideways. His head was an off-centre wedge with a torn raggedy ear. His fur was black with a huge slash of white zig-zagging across the top of his head, as large as the almost vanished scar on his forehead loomed in his mind. His eyes were still vivid green but they looked even more unearthly as a cat.

He meeped again and turned away to press his face into Sirius t-shirt.

“Hey it’s okay,” Sirius flicked his fingers to disperse the mirror. “It’s okay. I know it’s weird looking at yourself like that. He boosted Harry up into his arms so he could stroke him thoroughly, tip to tail. “It will be okay.”

Harry realized he was purring and couldn’t seem to stop himself.

“Yeah, that’s better isn’t it. Given you’re such a quiet human, you’re an amazingly noisy cat. You sound like a misfiring motorbike. No, no, that’s a good thing I promise.”

It was impossible to be agitated like this with Sirius’ large hand holding him and moulding him into shape. And, hey, no, Sirius was trying to put him down, and no. Harry sprung his claws and hooked them into Sirius t-shirt, ha, let’s see Sirius put him down now.

“Oh we like the cuddling do we?” Sirius teased, rubbing his thumb down Harry’s spine.

Humph, Harry didn’t have to put up with this. He bonked his head against Sirius cheek. It made Sirius smell a little bit like him and that was amazing, so he did it again.

“Easy there.” Sirius deliberately rubbed his cheek against him, and that was just as good. “You’re a little transfig-drunk aren’t you?”

Harry would be insulted but his eyes crossed in bliss as Sirius fingers scrunched the fur on his belly.

“Yeah, you definitely need to sober up before you try and turn back. Come on, let’s snuggle up in bed and pretend the day hasn’t started yet.”
Sirius rolled them up in a little nest of blankets and settled back half propped up against a pillow. He looked tired. Suddenly a lot less drunk, Harry patted his face with one paw.

“I’m fine Harry. Let’s just sit here for a bit, yeah?”

That sounded good to Harry. He let Sirius hold him close, his eyes drifting half-closed from the warm of his touch.

Sadly, eventually, they did have to get up. Harry sulked as Sirius coaxed,

“Come on, you need to change back. Or I’m going to start freaking out that you can’t change back. Then I’ll have to call James and, hell, I don’t know, Remus I guess, so we have three of us to force you back. Remus probably wouldn’t say anything because why break the habit of a lifetime but I’d rather keep it between us and James for the moment. Also being forced back into your human form is like being thrown into a wall and then beaten with sticks.”

“Mer-ow?”

“Yes very ow. James, Remus, and Peter did it to me back at school. Not recommended. So come on, change back. I’m pretty sure you’re just being cranky, but I’m starting to worry.”

“Mer-rup,” grumbled Harry, but he couldn’t worry Sirius so he stood up back into himself.

“Very smooth,” praised Sirius. “You all the way back?”

Harry intended to say, of course, but what came out was a squeaky almost purr. He jolted in surprise and Sirius caught him as he stumbled. Sirius’ hand stroked over his head and down his back.

“Not actually a cat,” Harry muttered.

“Try that on someone who’s other self isn’t a dog,” said Sirius.

Harry narrowed his eyes. Deliberately he mussed his hands through Sirius’ hair –annoyingly the part of him that hadn’t quite settled back down thought grooming his mate was an excellent plan and he had to resist the impulse to lick his paw, hand, it was a hand, lick his hand and smooth the hair into some sort of order. Even more annoyingly Sirius seemed aware of the impulse, grinning he tweaking Harry’s nose and then snuggled up against him.

“You’re very annoying,” said Harry.

“One does one’s best.”

Harry laughed. He was feeling a bit more sorted now. The cat part of him tucking away safely. He was still wasn’t sure about being a cat as opposed to being a hawk. He hadn’t wanted to go back to being the hard-trained killer, but what did it say for him that his animagus form had changed. He was so tired of being different.

“I didn’t think I’d be a cat animagus,” he said. Mostly because he’d been a hawk animagus. “Can you change your animagus form?”

“It’s a reflection of your soul, so not easily. There have been a couple of people who tried, it did not end well. Mostly they’d lose their form altogether - if they were lucky. Castor Black back in the
eighteenth century decided his heir’s goat form wasn’t appropriately grand. He forgot that goats are renowned for their stubbornness – and ability to eat anything.” Sirius winked at him, eyebrows bobbling.

“Seriously?”

“Would I be anything else?”

“Oh shut up.” Harry thumped him on the shoulder.

“Then there’s Leonis Black, from the thirteenth century. The records don’t say what form he originally had just that it changed. His wife and children were murdered during a raid in the Welsh Marches by the Peverells and he swore vengeance on anyone of that name. Which is common enough but he took things to extremes.”

“No,” Harry placed one hand over his mouth to look properly surprised, “a Black taking things to extremes. I am shocked, I tell you, shocked.”

“Yes alright,” grumbled Sirius. “He swore himself out of all natural law, there would be no pity or mercy in his soul. And as he chose to live outside human law, so his form changed to reflect that and he became a wolf. Nowadays we are far enough away from being terrified of wolves to rather admire them, but back then to be a wolfshead was to be an outlaw, accursed among men. And Leonis did it to himself.”

“Of course he did. And did he get his vengeance?”

“You see anyone calling themselves Peverell these days?”

“So what happened?”

Sirius looked at him for a second and then drew him close, his voice going low and confiding,

“It was a true wolf winter. He murdered the leaders of the raiding party and their wives and children, then started branching out through their brothers. The Peverell family organized themselves and managed to trap him one night when the moon was full and stabbed him to death, but death didn’t stop Leonis. On every full moon that followed his death, a giant ghostly wolf rose out of the silvery shadows and continued his mission. His victims died in locked rooms, fleeing on horseback, and on-board a ship, but they all died, their throats torn out and bleeding black in the moonlight. Until finally there was none left by the name of Peverell.”

Harry, looking at Sirius wide eyes and almost childish awe, had a thought, “Sirius, how old were you when you first heard this story?”

“Uh, five or six. It was one of Trixie’s favourites. He was my hero growing up. I rather missed the moral and thought the brutal murder of an entire family was completely justified vengeance until I told James and he thought Leonis was the villain.”

“And now?”

“To be honest, if something happened to James or, well, I don’t think I’d be very nice about it. But I like to think I could stop with the actual perpetrators. If for no other reason than I’d rather nobody came after me for the manifold Black crimes.”

“Are there lots of stories about Blacks being viciously insane?”
“Oh buckets, it’s what we’re known for. They say Leonis’ vengeance was so dreadful he cursed his entire line, but to be honest we were cursed long before that. If you think Leonis is bad you don’t want to know what we did to the Saxon wizards. And later, William the Bastard, he ended up burning down most of Northern England in response. And the Anarchy,” Sirius drooped, then brightened, “but hey, you haven’t heard the best bit about Leonis.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, about twenty years after the annihilation of the Peverells, some idiot who married into the Peverell line decided that he would reclaim the name.”

“Let me guess, Leonis came back.”

“Yup. The idiot had a big celebration and invited about half the wizarding world to thoroughly show-off. Anyone who knew the Blacks sent their regrets but enough idiots accepted the invitation that it ranks as one of the top five massacres in British wizarding history.”

“One of the top five?”

“Yes. Wizards are tricky. It’s hard to kill large numbers in one go. And there’s always some argument about exact numbers. The Blacks are the instigators of four out of the five, and we still say the Malfoys cheated by asking people to dinner and then burning down the house. Betrayal of hospitality is a crime.”

“But not burning down a house with people inside?” Harry was never going to understand the wizarding world.

“But if it’s their house. Then it’s a timely tactical strike.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“I’m not sure either. That’s why I don’t do politics.”

“You’d probably be very successful.”

“I don’t want to be successful at destroying people.”

“Me neither,” said Harry quietly. He butted his head softly against Sirius’ shoulder and Sirius stroked his hand soothingly over his back.

“So the idiot was having his fancy party and everyone was enjoying themselves eating and drinking too much, then the clock struck midnight and a cold wind rushed through the house and all the doors and windows slammed shut. The hall fell silent and a great rumbling growl echoed through the house and large feet began to pad along the floor. One of the servants realized what was happening and scrambled out of an upper floor privy to raise the alarm. When a group of neighbours came back the next day after the sun had risen, they found everyone who remained in the building had been torn to shreds except for the baby son of the house whose nursery maid had locked him in a large oak chest. The chest was covered in raking claw marks but the beast hadn’t been able to get inside.”

“What happened to the boy?”

“He was adopted by the Black family. Nobody else would take him. And from the day to this nobody has called themselves Peverell. And Leonis can still be seen on moonlight nights stalking the darkness for his prey – forever denied reunion with his family because of the strength of his
vow.”

“And you thought he was the hero?”

“When a Black does something they do it thoroughly. No half measures. They’re all terrifyingly mad.”

“But not you?”

“No, not me. That’s why I admired Leonis so much, he wasn’t scared. Totally insane, but not scared. I was, am, terrified all the time. You ever been terrified for so long that it seems perfectly normal and it takes something extra special for you to notice.”

Harry remembered a small boy who found fighting a basilisk depressingly normal and nodded.

Sirius squeezed his arm in sympathy. “That’s why I asked for Gryffindor. Everyone thinks it was some sort of defiant gesture, even my family, but it wasn’t. I figured Slytherin was going to be more of my family and I knew I couldn’t take that but I chose Gryffindor because I thought they could teach me how to be brave.”

Harry hugged Sirius tightly because as far as he could tell Sirius had never needed lessons in being brave.

“Total failure of course. And it’s sadly hilarious that the one thing I get a bit of credit for from the Light Side was actually just me being a stupid eleven year old.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders, “All eleven year olds are stupid, or, if you want to be technical, horribly young. And it worked out okay.”

“Yeah, I got James out of the deal. And Lily. And – well I’d do it again in heartbeat. Though if I had my time again I’d probably try and sell it to my parents as a tactical choice. But like I said I was a daft eleven year old. Though as a bonus it meant even my mother started being nicer to Reggie because they thought they might actually need him as a replacement.”

“That is depressing.”

“No it was great,” Sirius beamed, “I’d been so worried about Reggie, though Trixie promised me she’d look in on him, but as it turned out because my mother couldn’t get hold of me to vent her displeasure until Christmas, she had to make do with being excessively nice to Reggie in the hopes it would upset me. I was so relieved I’d have picked Gryffindor for that alone. Of course Christmas wasn’t any fun, but it never was really, and I got to go back to Hogwarts and James is amazing at healing potions even if he’ll never admit it because potions are boring dad-things.”

Harry decided he preferred talking about insane psychotic Blacks who hadn’t known Sirius, it was better for his blood pressure.

“So Leonis Black changed his animagus form?”

“Yes, he allowed vengeance to corrupt him until he’d changed his own soul. Not recommended.”

“But could you do it the other way?”

“You can’t generally uncorrupt souls. But –” Sirius hmmed thoughtfully, “I guess if receiving a soul hurt can change your form, healing a soul hurt might have a similar effect. That’s hard to pull off but it can be done. If someone truly gave up being a death eater, for example, they might well
change forms to reflect that. But probably only going back to their original form – even if they
didn’t know it – whatever they would have been if they hadn’t been stupid enough to join the death
eaters.”

Harry thought about that. He hadn’t been a death eater but he had been the Order’s hooded
executioner, tamed and trained to kill death eaters since he started at Hogwarts. Here though he
wasn’t a captured hawk, he was just an abandoned thing of no more use.

He glanced cautiously at Sirius, waiting for him to ask why Harry was so interested in how to
change an animagus form. But no, there wasn’t a hint of suspicion in Sirius face. Harry shook his
head at himself. He was an idiot. How could he have forgotten that Sirius found extensive
questioning to be perfectly normal. He must have driven everyone nuts as a child always asking,
how, and, why, and worst of all, what if.

“It isn’t likely though,” Sirius continued, “so I guess you’re stuck with being my alley cat.”

Harry rubbed his head against Sirius’ shoulder. He could live with that.

The thump against the loft hatch made them both jump.

“Are you decent?” called Rosmerta.

“Never,” Sirius called back, “it’s against my philosophy.” He drew away from Harry, giving his
hand one last squeeze, and knelt down to release the hatch. “What’s going on?”

“You’ve got popular,” said Rosmerta. “My pub is jam full of visitors for you.”

“Oh,” said Sirius, his back going stiff. “We’ll be down in one moment.”

“Take your time.”

Harry could hear her walking away.

“I could apparate us out of here,” he offered quietly, not liking Sirius’ sharp tension.

“So could I,” said Sirius. “The question is where to go.”

“I could kidnap you.”

“What?”

“I could kidnap you.” Harry repeated, growing more delighted with idea the longer he thought
about it. “There are hundreds of islands we could hide where no one would ever find us. We could
go to Greece. There’s a warded island off the coast of Ithaca –”

“Harry.”

“What?” grumbled Harry. He didn’t want his dream crushed by reality just yet.

“Much as I would love to, I can’t run away to Greece with you.”

“You don’t get to have an opinion, you’re being kidnapped remember.”

“Yes but then James would track you down and kill you.”
“Hah. James would understand completely.”

Sirius tilted his head as he considered that, “Okay fine, he probably would. But I’m not leaving James alone at Hogwarts. That’s just not happening.”

“But.”

“Do you think we couldn’t have worked something out these last ten years or so? Sure Dumbledore wants both of us, but he knows if he’s got one of us he has the other on a string. I could have hidden away if we tried hard enough.”

Harry twitched.

“Sorry,” said Sirius.

Harry twitched more fiercely. If Sirius didn’t stop apologizing for being unhappy, he was going to do violence.

“Now let’s go see what the ravening horde want before they break down our door.”

“Fine.”

“Oh, and,” Sirius shifted from foot to foot, suddenly looking shy, “can you not mention the Black stories to anyone. They’re, well some of the facts are common knowledge, but the stories are private, for family only.”

“And James,” said Harry, because he wasn’t jealous of James except for all the ways that he was.

“Obviously James, he’s family too. I guess legally it might be iffy because we were underage, but legally doesn’t really come into when it comes to family magic and we did the sibling binding ritual fair and square even if we were only twelve.”

Harry had always wondered if his father and godfather had done a family binding but he’d never known for sure. He’d only found out about bindings after his godfather had fallen through the veil so he’d never been able to ask him, and no one else wanted to talk about his godfather. He’d been dropped as a subject for polite conversation. It was deeply satisfying to know his father and godfather’d had chosen to be family.

Letting someone use your surname, letting them be family, was a huge deal in the wizarding world. Bill had told him all that, but Harry hadn’t understood until one night when they were all sitting around feeling sorry for themselves. Lisa Turpin had been lamenting how alone she was since her last distant cousin had been killed even though she’d barely known the man. And Susan Bones said there weren’t any Bones left either, did she fancy sharing their names. Harry had thought it a bit weird. But Lisa, a half-blood brought up wizard, had burst into noisy tears and said, yes, yes, please. They’d had a little ceremony later, turning them into sisters and actual saffron was dredged up from somewhere to make the traditional little cake things and half the Auror teams had been in tears.

Harry smiled at Sirius so glad he and James had each other for family.

“Twelve?” he checked, imagining baby Sirius and James with adorably serious expressions and borrowed athames.

“Twelve,” Sirius confirmed. “Oh and that’s a secret too. A lot of people assume we’re bound brothers, they figure that’s the only reason he didn’t kill me out of hand after everything, but they
don’t know we were so young. You’re not supposed to be able to manage ritual magic until you’re at least fifteen or so. Of course we didn’t know that.”

“What then?”

“We’d just made it back to Hogwarts after the first summer holiday. Summer wasn’t—it wasn’t much fun. And Reg, he’d discovered all the advantages to being the favourite and was enjoying rubbing it in and I can’t truly blame him because I’d always been the favourite before, not that being the favourite was much fun for me either. And mother—so not much fun.”

Harry wondered if there were curses that could reach into the afterlife. That sounded like the sort of thing the Blacks might have researched.

“And James had been lonely, he’d always wanted a brother. Reg had said, I know he didn’t mean really but it still—anyway, he said he didn’t want me as a brother anymore so it seemed perfect. We nicked one of athames from the library display, and one of the restricted sections books on ritual magic, did the ritual and promptly knocked ourselves out from the magical backlash. Fortunately we had the sense to do it at a weekend and Remus just dumped a duvet over us and left us to it.”

“How exactly did you two survive long enough to graduate Hogwarts?”

Sirius grinned at him, “Clean living and moral fortitude.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“James and Lily did a binding too, a partners binding the night before their wedding.”

“I didn’t think that was the done thing?” Back in the other universe Molly had been furious about Bill and Fleur’s binding, even though Veela didn’t even recognize weddings except as an important human ritual.

“It depends on how willing you are to make it obvious you’re in love with your wife, no, more than that, that you consider her your equal. Malfoy is a bastard who deserves to be in Azkaban but you have to give him credit, he did a binding with Cissy before they married. He tells everyone it was to make sure Draco’s inheritance through the Black line was secure but we all know that’s him spinning a line. He wouldn’t let her wear her hair like that and make it so obvious if he wasn’t crazy about her.” Sirius glared at the floor. “Wanker.”

“And James and Lily did that?”

Sirius’ mood lifted as his quicksilver eyes lit up, “They did. It was the loveliest thing. James wanted to invite Lily’s parents but she said they thought it was ‘quaint’ and it was too important to have them there not understanding, they’d be happier just attending the wedding. They were muggles and apparently muggles think weddings are romantic, instead of just being about acquiring a vessel to produce legitimate heirs to the family property.” Sirius’ face squinched up, “Sorry, you’re a muggle, you must think that too.”

“Less and less by the second,” Harry assured him, trying not to laugh.

“Well I am sorry. It’s not really weddings as such, but purebred weddings. The family managed to force Trixie to marry purebred style and there was never any hope for her after that. Andi picked a muggle ceremony, Nymphandora’s technically illegitimate from a magical point of view, and no I don’t think this was an accident. And as I said, Cissy had a binding ritual first. Malfoy even left out some of the more onerous clauses of the actual wedding ceremony. Which was very low class—if you don’t go to Hogwarts you don’t usually have the magic to support the more demanding
marriage oaths so they usually leave a lot out – but Cissy let that slide for once.”

“See, that wedding sounds romantic.” It was strange thinking of the Malfoys as romantic but in the other universe, and clearly this one too, Lucius Malfoy, sadistic but not rabid, was actually on the progressive side of the purebloods. This continued to blow Harry’s mind.

“Lily said muggle weddings aren’t like the purebreds, though her sister’s wedding wasn’t really convincing on that score. But Lily did say the promise to obey wasn’t a coercion so I guess that’s something. A lot of pureblood wizarding wives could get jobs as contract lawyers they’re so good at working around their husband’s orders.”

Harry shifted his feet. He’d been iffy about wizarding marriage since Hermione studied up on the ceremony, and the restrictions it imposed on the wife. She had, well, exploded was the mild term. Ron had unwittingly made things worse when he said because she was a muggle-born they’d have a binding instead. Misled by the name, Hermione hadn’t realized what he meant and exploded even worse. By the time things calmed down enough for Harry to explain, too much had been said (yelled) on both sides for their romance to be patched up and after an awkward period of excessive politeness they had settled back into being friends. Then, when they got used to each other again, great friends. Harry would have been jealous but he hadn’t been feeling much of anything by that point.

“Of course my mother did alright for herself because she was a Black so the family magic gave her a fair bit of leeway. Which was why she wanted the match in the first place.”

“Wait, is that witches marry their cousins?”

“Sure, if they can manage it. Why would you want to be second class in another family when you can stick with your own?” Sirius looked so uncomprehending at why any witch could want different that Harry groaned.

“I bet you’re thinking about inbreeding. Muggles always fuss about inbreeding. It’s like they pay no attention to how breeders actually operate. Inbreeding to preserve desirable traits is endemic. I know it’s the same for muggles because I got Lily to check and she rang her sister-in-law.”

Harry tried hard not to flinch at the mention of Aunt Marge.

“Inbreeding produces nervy, highly strung animals – which explains a hell of a lot when you think about it – with sharply defined characteristics. That’s exactly what wizards want, to keep the family magics and property intact.”

“But what about the damage? What about squibs?”

“Oh the elders of a family will put up with those to keep their precious magical specialities. Just like muggles will breed dogs that can’t walk or cats with deformed cartilage – because they look pretty. All you need is to be able to tolerate a high incidence of inadequate specimens that need to be put down.” Sirius shrugged his shoulders with the careful flippancy of someone who’d used up all his swear words long ago.

The sheer casualness of the cruelty left Harry both very queasy and very angry.

Sirius tilted his head, “You look just like Lily did. White face and green eyes trying to set the world on fire. I know unusual colouring makes you over estimate how much people resemble each other but I can’t seem to stop myself doing it. Weird.”

Harry was mostly caught up in recognizing Sirius had a Lily-expression. When he talked about
Lily his face and voice grew gentle. It wasn’t the wistfulness that came when he talked about Narcissa but a profound affection that tempered the starkly aristocratic lines of his face into something soft and fond.

Sirius shook his head roughly and when he looked at Harry again all the Lily-expression was gone,

“Don’t worry,” he said so harshly the words were a mockery. “The recent generations of the Black family got lucky. Phineas Nigellus, despite being an all-round asshole, had no tolerance for just writing off members of his family. His older brother died when Phineas was six years old after being pushed out of a window and failing to bounce.”

“God, your family is –” Harry could not think of an appropriate word.

“Insane? Twisted? A freak show?” Sirius grinned sharp as cut glass. “No need to censor yourself to spare my feelings. I guarantee I’ve heard it before.”

“Moron,” said Harry and wrapped his arms tightly around Sirius and hung on until the spikiness faded and it no longer felt like he was clutching a thorn bush.

“So what did Lily say?” he asked because he was sick of stories about the dark side of Sirius’ family and wanted to hear about the side that actually loved Sirius.

“After she spoke to her sister-in-law? She went sheet white and had to run off and throw up. I felt awful because she was pregnant with Harry and I shouldn’t have been arguing with her even she was acting like wizards were too stupid to know about inbreeding instead of being too stupid to care about it.”

“Uh Sirius, that’s not actually an improvement.” It was one thing not to know, but to know and not care was far, far worse.

Sirius winked, sly and mean, “You forget we’re Hogwarts wizards, we have a house for intelligence – but kindness is not a virtue we overly concern ourselves with.”

“Stop including yourself in the world’s crazy. You are very kind.” He scowled when it looked like Sirius wanted to protest. “You’re kind to your students and you’re kind to Madam Rosmerta.”

“Pure self-interest. Now Lily knew how to appeal to self-interest. She still white and retching when she held me and James at wandpoint and made us swear on our bones, blood, and breath that we would never force her children into breeding or marriage.”

“Go Lily. Not that you would have done that anyway.”

“Well no, because James would have gutted me with my own wand if I’d even thought about it.”

“Sure, that’s the reason.”

“What?” Sirius folded his arms sulkily.

“Sirius, sweetie pie, honey bunch, you wouldn’t force anybody into marriage. And definitely not someone you loved.” Harry wasn’t sure why Sirius was acting as if he were secretly a horrible person but it was getting annoying. “I don’t know why Lily was worried.”

Sirius looked even sulkier but the Lily-expression was creeping into his eyes,

“Actually she burst into tears and apologized. Said she knew neither of us would do that, but she
was worried because things could change, and she was terrified because they were letting Aurors use the Unforgiveables and she knew that changed people even if they claimed it didn’t and she didn’t want to lose us. Which given me and Jay were currently catching hell for being too soft on the Death Eaters because we weren’t using the Unforgivables seemed unfair.”

“And?”

“James tried explaining that but she just cried harder. So I told her she was very sensible because Malfoy and Narcissa had both been after me for a marriage between the children. Which was when James admitted Malfoy had been after him, and Lily said Narcissa had been talking to her and neither of the two idiots had told them to fuck off because they were worried about insulting my family. Honestly, I have never… Such incredibly stupid, wonderful, idiots.” Sirius grabbed at the air in exasperation,

“You can’t afford to leave the slightest opening with those sort of negotiations. And I’d duel anyone on Cissy’s behalf but I’d never – So we constructed a beautiful howler that told Malfoy how very much there was never, ever, going to be a contract between our families. Or any other families. And they were fools to do so themselves. Then we sent it to them at the Carrow’s Yule ball.”

“I bet that went down well.” Harry pictured all those stuffy purebloods in their most elegant robes listening to a howler cursing them out.

“I was challenged to six duels,” said Sirius proudly. “Though not by Malfoy because you wouldn’t think it but there’s some sense in his overly-pretty head, when he’s not swearing blood oaths to dark lords that is.”

“You fought six duels?”

“No the wusses all backed off after I arrested Dionysus and Hieronymus Nott. Fought them to a standstill in muggle London and annoyed the hell out of everybody.”

“Even James?”

“Especially James. I think he and Crouch were most annoyed with me actually. Crouch because he had completely failed the two times he’d tried to arrest them, although he said it was because of breaching the Secrecy Act. And James because I left him behind.”

“He let himself be left behind?”

“I kinda stuck his feet to the floor. And stole his wand.”

“I’m surprised he was only annoyed.”

“He was furious, Lily was too strangely. But I told him I could fight better on my own but that made him so mopey – and I was worried he was going to damage himself training so much – in the end I had to admit I just didn’t want him to see me fight them. The Unforgivables, for all people fear them, are not the most vicious curses.”

“Did James tell you that you were an idiot?”

“Very loudly.”

“Good, then I don’t need to.”
“You are all very exasperating,” said Sirius.

Harry felt that in some way he was failing to react the way Sirius wanted him to. “Why are you telling me horror stories about wizarding marriages anyway?”

“Those aren’t horror stories. If I wanted to tell you horror stories I’d start with my Aunt Druella. She had been forbidden from going outside for five years before she killed herself. I don’t know if she deliberately killed herself or if she just couldn’t face not feeling the sun on her skin anymore.”

Harry tried to say that was exactly his point, why did Sirius feel the need mention that like it was an attack, but Sirius kept right on talking.

“Or the Lestranges are always good, there’s –”

“Stop,” said Harry. “Why are you telling me horrible stories? It’s like you want me to run away screaming.”

“Why on earth would I want that?”

“That wasn’t answer. That was – you were prevaricating. Why were you prevaricating? You do want me to run away screaming.”

“Of course I don’t, I’d just prefer it if you ran away screaming soon rather than later.”

“Oh you idiot. I’m not leaving without you.”

“You should. I can’t leave but you don’t need to stay.”

“If you’re not leaving I kinda do.”

“Have you not heard a word I said? And bear in mind muggle-born are several steps below their wives for most purebreds. You’d be crazy to stay. I mean the wizarding world got its hooks into Lily when she was too young to know better, but you have a chance.”

“How are they ever going to change their minds if the muggle-born don’t stick it out and shove their existence down their throats?”

“I completely agree with you. But I’m not talking about a random muggle-born, I’m talking about you. I want you to be happy more than I want another martyr to the cause. Principles are all very fine until you’re the one with the black eye, or worse. You don’t understand how hard it is. Hell, I don’t understand how hard it is, not really.”

Harry considered that for a second because it was true he understood a lot more about what muggle-borns faced than Sirius realized, but at the same time standing with Hermione was not at all the same thing as actually being in her position.

But that was all irrelevant. It didn’t matter how hard it was, he wasn’t leaving Sirius, and Sirius wasn’t ever going to leave this beautiful, cruel world. Harry wasn’t even sure he could leave, magic sunk had sunk into his bones, it was never going to let him go.

He glared at Sirius, “Do I have to invest in handcuffs, or are you going to shut up and be reasonable about this?”

“Nothing about this is reasonable.”

Harry grinned at him, “Sounds perfect for us then.”
“Idiot,” said Sirius roughly, picking Harry up and flinging him over his shoulder.

“Hey!” Harry yelped, reaching down to grab Sirius’ leg and using his weight to throw him off balance. They tumbled towards the floor the floor still grappling with each other. As he shoved Sirius with his knee, Harry aimed a softening charm at the floor so they wouldn’t do themselves too much damage when they landed.

They hit the floor with a soft flump and bounced a foot in the air before landing again. Harry fought his way out of the pillowy floor.

“Softening charms aren’t usually so springy,” he said as he twisted around to pin Sirius to the floofiness.

“Yeah well, usually the floor doesn’t get hit with two softening charms.” Sirius struggled just enough to make Harry hold on tighter but not enough to actually get away.

“You are a very annoying person,” Harry told him sternly, still hanging on tight.

“Part of my charm.”

“Hmph. So is it going to be handcuffs?”

“No I’ll be good, but honestly you should –”

Harry squeezed down against Sirius’ rib cage.

“– okay, okay, fine, forgive me for looking out for you, geez.”

Harry sighed, “I am grateful you’re concerned for me, but I have made my decision. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t second guess me. You wouldn’t leave the wizarding world for anything, why would I?”

“I feel I should offer to go with you. I feel I should be able to leave for you. But I can’t. I’m sorry Harry but I can’t leave.”

“That’s okay. We’re both staying. We’re just going to have to fix things.”

“Oh Merlin, you’re just like Jay. What on earth makes you think things are fixable? I know these people.”

“Technically you are one of these people, and you turned out just fine.”

“That was a total accident. And also because I am a complete failure.”

“You are not a failure.” Harry wondered if James could lend him a mallet to bang that thought into Sirius’ thick head.

“Would you like to discuss that with my mother.”

“Yes actually. At length.”

Sirius laughed, “Alright, I’ll shut up. I don’t know what I was arguing about, cats will always do as they choose.”

“Exactly,” said Harry. “Now as punishment for being an idiot you have to tell me one nice thing about a wizard wedding before I’ll let you go.”
“I don’t think you understand either punishment or threats but I’ll leave that discussion for later. Now one nice thing…” Sirius pulled a thinky face, “Can it be scandalous?”

“If you must.”

“Oh I must. Okay then, James left all the clauses out of his and Lily’s marriage vows. They each vowed to love, honour, and cherish each other for all their days, and that was it.”

“That was scandalous?”

“Muggle,” Sirius accused fondly. “There wasn’t even a faithfulness clause, which gave all the fusty lot palpitations. And they didn’t time lapse it, that vow will carry on even when they reincarnate. Which was why they left out faithfulness, because there’d be nothing more embarrassing than having promised sexual faithfulness to, say, your sister. So wherever they go in the next life they’ll still love and protect each other.”

“That’s a pretty good nice thing.”

“I know, right. It was lovely. James’ dad was in tears for the whole ceremony. It was also a scandal like you would not believe. We’ve got all the newspaper clipping saved somewhere. They very nearly passed a motion in the Wizengamot to force James to be tested for love potions.”

“What did you do?”

“Well James’ dad, who was just as bad as James really, said if there was a love potion that worked that well he’d have made a second fortune from it but unfortunately even with his son being that disgustingly in love he still couldn’t figure out how to bottle it. And James’ mum said she didn’t know what all the fuss was about, James had always been a lazy lump, it didn’t surprise her at all that he went for the simplest vows he could find, just like she always had to spell the bath towels to fold themselves back onto the heating rail. And then she gave Lily the full set of Potter jewels, which, there was no more obvious way she could show her complete approval of the match. She also included a copy of the incantation to hang towels.”

“And that shut people up?”

“It stopped them squawking at us which was the important point.”

“I don’t see why it was anyone else’s business.”

“You definitely don’t understand the wizarding world, it runs on other people’s business.”

“Fair point. So I guess I should let you up now.”

“If you must.”

“Well I don’t have to.”

“I,” there was a shuffling below them and Sirius flopped back into the spongy floor and cursed. “Duty calls.”

“Sirius Black!” Rosmerta yelled up at them. “Sometime soon would be good!”

“We’re coming,” Sirius shouted back.

“I don’t need to know that, I just need you downstairs.”
“What?” Sirius flushed pink as he got it. “Rosie!”

“Us old folk were young once you know.”

“Actually,” Sirius heaved himself onto his hands and knees and crawled over to the hatch so they could speak normally, “Harry and I have been having a very interesting discussion.”

“That’s sadly true, isn’t it? Well nobody can say you two aren’t suited. Now stop talking Harry’s ears off and come deal with your visitors.”

“I like listening to Sirius talk,” said Harry grumpily.

“I know you do, dear,” soothed Rosmerta.

“We’re talking about wizarding marriage customs,” he insisted, still grumpy.

“I take back everything I was thinking about Sirius moving ridiculously slowly.”

“Huh?” Harry looked at Sirius, who was now a painful red. Huh. Maybe Sirius wasn’t just trying to show off how cruel the wizarding world could be with a lengthy discussion of how marriage and binding magic worked. Maybe it was Harry that was being slow.

Sirius started to fidget, watching Harry carefully from downcast eyes. Harry smiled deliberately and leaned forward to press a kiss to one hot cheek. Sirius exhaled with relief, his whole body relaxing. Harry knocked his knuckles gently against the back of Sirius’ hand.

“Let’s go deal with whatever it is together.”

Sirius smiled back, grey eyes soft and luminous.
As Sirius swung himself down the ladder, Harry fought down the impulse to declare that actually he’d deal with whatever the problem was. Sirius could just stay here safe in their room. In fact Sirius could stay in their room permanently. They could make the room bigger with magic and let the sun in through the roof. It would be lovely. It would also be completely secure and nobody would ever be able to get in and hurt Sirius again.

Unfortunately getting Sirius to stay inside would require either locks or magic and probably both. Maybe he could do the reverse of what Hermione did and simply make Sirius forget about the outside world entirely – and now Harry was sounding creepy even to himself. He hadn’t meant to think that really, it was just his brain suggesting a solution to a problem he shouldn’t even be considering.

He glared down at his magic that was already reaching out for Sirius and wrapped it back into himself.

“You behave,” he told himself. Because his magic was him and when he was keyed up it sometimes reacted to stray thoughts in ways that were not helpful. Like the time they were staggering back into Hogwarts, drenched, and desperate, and desperately hungry. Then Hermione had said, I’m so hungry I could eat a horse. Harry, his magic wild beneath his skin from days on the ragged edge, had automatically reached out – and his magic had supplied a horse. It was a yellowy one with a black mane and tail. It had neighed in surprise. All of them had stared at back it. Hermione said, no not dealing with this now, and vanished into Hogwarts. Harry ended up taking the horse for a walk.

He wasn’t sure where his magic had grabbed the horse from so he walked him down to the police station in the muggle village nearest Hogwarts. They weren’t precisely used to strange things happening but they’d been obliterated so many times they were still reeling from it and simply nodded along. They’d wanted Harry to go to hospital but Harry couldn’t bear the thought of being the reason they were oblviated again, and all those poor nurses just doing their jobs. So he staggered back to Hogwarts and was thinking actually, now a horse would be really useful, and caught his magic reaching out again wanting to fulfil his desire despite his more sensible side knowing it would only cause more problems. Magic was a bit like being drunk, your censor of stupid impulses just wasn’t there.

“Harry?” Sirius’ anxious grey eyes looked up at him, “you okay?”

Love coiled around him so thick and tight he couldn’t breathe for a second. The urge to scoop Sirius up and forcibly install him in a safe room was almost unbearable. But now even his magic seemed dejected by the idea, because Sirius would hate it, and Sirius would hate him. (Also Sirius
was the person who most equalled him in magic power that Harry had ever met, and the mean little part of Harry that didn’t care if Sirius hated him as long as he got to keep Sirius for himself recognized that Sirius was powerful enough and sneaky enough to escape from any place Harry tried to trap him. Which was one of the reasons that mean little part of him loved Sirius so much but it was also thoroughly inconvenient.

“Don’t look so worried,” said Sirius, “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

On the other hand Harry might just kill the idiot and solve all his problems in one go.

“That’s better,” Sirius smiled at him. “You look much more cheerful.”

What Harry looked like was homicidal, Sirius was definitely an idiot.

“After we’ve got rid of the crowds, you could make me poached eggs on toast for breakfast. None of us can figure out poached eggs and they’re my favourite.” Sirius twitched suddenly, “You can make poached eggs, right?”

“Of course I can cook poached eggs.” And ha, Sirius didn’t know anyone else who could cook him poached eggs. Harry was going to make him the best poached eggs. “Are you a white or brown bread person?”

“Granary,” said Sirius. He was grinning at Harry now, indulgent and fond. Harry wiggled under the warmth.

“I am going to make you the best poached eggs,” he promised.

“I know.” Sirius grinned at him some more and then vanished down the ladder. Harry followed him.

When they walked into the main room, Harry was mostly focused on decided which bakery to get granary bread from. He’d kept track in that other universe and things were likely to be similar here. He was debating between an artisan shop in Notting Hill, which was annoyingly upscale but did have really great bread, or the one in a tiny village in Wales that Harry had stopped visiting after he’d been tagged by a death eater assassination squad and left an endless number of dark robes broken and bloody. Of course that didn’t happen here so Harry could go back to Wales without feeling as if his boots would skid on blood and viscera that had long vanished below the moss. His magic, which didn’t even pretend to react to his frustration with Sirius, was enthusiastically crawling over the surrounding area looking for the absolute freshest eggs to accio.

Then they walked into the main room of the pub and found Rosmerta had not been understating the case. Half the village seemed to be there waiting for them. Harry’s grab for his wand was only halted by Sirius’ sudden clutch for his hand.

“Oh damn,” said Sirius, “I didn’t think of that.”

“Think of what?” Harry moved slightly in front of Sirius. Bethan’s mother headed the delegation so he would have supposed things to be okay, but Harry had learned the hard way that people didn’t always react the way he’d anticipate when someone they loved was hurt. He might not be able to lock Sirius up for his own safety but a secure base of operations where nobody could bother them had become mission critical.

Sirius stepped up so he was settled at Harry’s shoulder.

“Good morning Mrs Wilding.”
“Good morning Lord Black,” said Bethan’s mother, her voice shaky. “Good morning,” she paused and stared expectantly at Harry. Harry stared back, not sure what she was waiting on. Bethan must have told her his name. As the pause grew uncomfortable, Sirius said,

“Just Harry is fine Mrs Wilding.”

“Oh, okay,” her fluttering fingers reached out to Harry and then skittered away.

Harry did his shiniest polite smile, “I’m sorry. Can I help you with something ma’am?”

All her quivering composure broke, Bethan’s mother wailed and threw herself at him. Harry bit his lip and endured. Fortunately Sirius quickly came to his rescue fielding her away from him and into Rosmerta’s arms.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I promised myself I wouldn’t cry but I’m so grateful.”

“It was nothing, we’re just lucky it worked,” said Harry. “I’m glad I could help.” He tried to retreat but Sirius wrapped his arm around his waist and held him there, rubbing his thumb against the skin just above Harry’s hip in apology before hooking his fingers into the loop of Harry’s jeans.

“It is not nothing you foolish boy. You saved my Bethan. I owe you everything I have.”

“Really not,” Harry muttered, acutely uncomfortable. They’d been a few awkward encounters like this, usually he managed to wriggle away, but Sirius was not releasing the grip he had on Harry’s jeans.

“We’re not a fancy family,” she glanced briefly at Sirius before fixing he intent eyes on Harry. Harry made another attempt to edge away before giving up and attempting to put a smile back in place, “but we are good with a needle and thread, so these are for you.” She held out a small pile of neatly folded embroidered handkerchiefs. “I thought you might find them useful if you’re going start hanging out with the fancy crowd.”

Harry squirmed uncomfortably, he did not want a reward for saving Bethan, it wasn’t all him anyway. He was so used to being rubbish at healing spells it might not even have occurred to him to say anything if Sirius hadn’t spoken up.

“Thank you, but I really don’t need – ” he started.

Her face lost its tremulous smile and she hunched up like Harry had yelled at her. Harry felt bad for that, but at the same time he didn’t even want to be here. If Sirius had just let him escape they could have avoided all this awkwardness. Hand-stitched handkerchiefs were expensive. And not really required by anyone not a pureblood (they all thought muggle tissues were an utter outrage, it was hilarious. When Ron and Hermione had still been trying to go out with each other, one of their blowout arguments had been Hermione’s refusal to use handkerchiefs. They finally compromised with Hermione agreeing to carry an unused hanky together with muggle tissues. Molly Weasley still used to give her handkerchiefs on every socially acceptable gift-giving occasion, Molly made all her families handkerchiefs.)

“Really,” Harry said as kindly as he could, “it’s – ” and then Sirius was dragging him backwards.

“Sorry ladies and gents, Harry’s a muggle, he doesn’t understand. We’ll be back in two ticks.” Then he hauled Harry back into the kitchen and shut the door. Harry went with it because he didn’t want to shout in front of everyone.

“Don’t call me a muggle,” he said, “I do understand that handkerchiefs like that sell for a galleon a
piece and that must be half her stock. I can’t just take them.”

“Harry, shush, calm down.”

“I will not shush.”

“Look do you trust me?”

Harry huffed, he was angry but that was dirty pool. “Of course I trust you.” He folded his arms and glared because that was not the point.

“Alright then, will you calm down enough to listen to me? I’m not going to tell you what to do but I want you to have all the facts before making a decision.”

Harry huffed again. “Stop being so bloody reasonable.”

Sirius laughed, “I don’t think anyone’s called me that before.” He tugged lightly at Harry’s arm and Harry let his arms relax and unfold. His anger was abandoning him, it was impossible to be angry when Sirius was smiling at him, inviting him to share the joke. He allowed Sirius to catch his hand in both of his,

“Go on then,” he said. “Tell the stupid muggle what he’s missing.”

“Not stupid,” said Sirius quickly. “Never stupid. Not knowing something is only stupid if you refuse to learn.” He was so earnest about it that Harry kissed him.

“Go on then,” he encouraged.

“So first, Bethan’s mother will have brought every handkerchief in her shop, she’d be ashamed to offer anything less.”

“But,” Surely that made it even more important not to take advantage of her. Harry couldn’t clear her out of stock.

Sirius pressed one finger against his lips and Harry subsided into a grumpy hunch of shoulders.

“I don’t know how it works with muggles but with wizards, with magic, a gift demands a gift. When you save someone’s life they owe you a life debt.”

Yes, Harry did know about life debts, that did not mean he was going to ransack the stock of a haberdashery. He didn’t even want handkerchiefs. “I’m not going to –”

“I know you don’t want to – and it does you credit – but not acknowledging the dragon in the room doesn’t stop it from eating you. You can’t ignore a debt away.”

“You don’t owe Aurors if they save you.”

“Well, one, an Auror would actually have to save you first; and two, you don’t technically owe the Auror anything but you and your family should bear it in mind when you deal with them or their family.”

“You are honestly telling me you owe an Auror for saving you?” Harry figured he had to be misunderstanding something somewhere.

“Not really. Not if you’re someone like Bethan or her mother. It’s like, if someone did save your life, you’d be nice to them right, say thank you, you being you you’d probably bake them a cake or
something.”

“Maybe.” Harry admitted cautiously, not wanting to make any concessions.

“So it’s like that. There’s an obligation to remember that they saved your life and to be considerate because of that. And also to vote the way the Head of Law Enforcement suggests at the next election. There’s a reason Ministers of Magic tend to come up via Head Auror and the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. Fudge only got in because Crouch was a non-starter.”

Harry’s inner Hermione had started shrieking so loudly he was surprised Sirius couldn’t hear her, “Has it occurred to anyone that this is a great way to end up living in a police state?” he demanded.

“You think we’re not living in one?”

“Uh.” Harry wasn’t sure how he hadn’t noticed that before.

“What do you think James is doing all day? You should talk to him, or rather be talked at by him because once you get him going he doesn’t know how to stop. I think he nearly broke down and cried tears of joy when Lily took him to a muggle book shop and showed him the politics section. He has a muggle degree in Social and Political Science from Cambridge because muggles have been worrying about these sort of things for years and they enabled him to articulate the issues embedded within the system or what the fuck ever. Honestly, do not get him started unless you’re sitting comfortably and have a pint of fire whiskey to hand.”

“What do you do all day?” Harry asked curiously.

“Uh.” Sirius looked caught out for a second. “What makes you think I do anything except laze around drinking cocktails and living off my inheritance.”

“Because I’ve know you for longer than five minutes. Don’t tell me if you don’t want to.” Harry was not sulking.

“I have a degree in Ancient Languages and a Masters in Hieroglyphics,” Sirius offered in apology.

“No politics?”

“Never politics. James lost that round of liar’s poker fair and square.”

Harry made his eyes very big, “James was going to let someone else be in charge of politics?”

Sirius laughed out loud, “Well no, obviously not. It was a strategic loss or whatever they call it. Anyway he has plans for a slow gradual change in political structure. Because you can’t just stop using a political system that mostly works, well you can, it’s called a revolution and they usually end up with a lot of people dying. And I am so very tired of people dying.”

“With you all the way.” Harry had painfully begun to understand why everyone had been in denial about you-know-who coming back. They’d been wrong, criminally wrong, but he could understand how the idea of another slog had seemed too much to contemplate. He had no idea where Riddle had found the energy.

“I’m not convinced it will come off, the wizarding world is too used to the idea the guy with the most magical power makes the rules, but I have faith in Jay, and hell, it’s worth a shot isn’t it?”

Harry was definitely unconvinced that it could come off, but he believed in James a little, and just
because it was going to be a fight was no reason not to do something, not if it was worthwhile. Harry understood fighting, “Yes it’s worth a shot.”

“After all it only took the muggles around seven hundred years, that’s not so long really. Our children’s children could see it.”

Harry shook his head, “Wizarding generations are weird.”

Sirius deliberately scrunched his face at him, “Muggle generations are weird. It’s no wonder traditions seem to flutter by them.”

“Not all traditions are good,” said Harry carefully.

Sirius laughed harshly, “Oh I know that. There are lots that I’d consign to history, will consign to history if Jay will help me. But they are still our traditions. I’d stop them inflicting pureblood training on Neville if I could. And I’d die before I let them –” he broke off sharply. “But it still feels like we’re losing something. I don’t understand my own head sometimes.” Sirius yanked at his hair in frustration.

“Hey none of that,” Harry caught Sirius hands in his. They beat against his grip, febrile as a trapped bird. “Tell me –” Harry racked his brain for a question that would distract him. “Tell me what you meant when you said Bethan wouldn’t owe the Aurors. Who does owe the Aurors if they get rescued?”

“Oh if it was someone important in the world, someone like James. Now if James was saved by the Aurors, he’d have to make a big thing out of paying them back or he’d lose credit. He’d have to buy them all wand holsters or something, and sponsor the division celebration, and some sort of expensive jewellery for the particular Auror who saved him, and grovel a lot. Fortunately James is extremely unlikely to be saved by an Auror because they’d have to actually show up first.”

“Wizards make things so damn complicated.”

“We carry death sticks in our back pockets, of course we make things complicated, otherwise we’d have all killed each other by now.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way before.”

“Which is why you have to accept the gifts from Bethan’s mother. I mean, you don’t actually have to, you can leave her with owing you a life debt but that is a real dick move.”

“You shouldn’t leave people owing a life debt?” Harry asked, thinking of Snape.

“Not if you can help it. It’s cruel leaving something like that over their heads. You should let people pay their debts in general, but particularly life debts. In the old days you could be forced into service until the person who was owed declared the debt cleared. Thank goodness they moved slowly to the point where you’d do a day’s symbolic service, and now gifts can be given instead. Nobody leaves a life debt open unless you’re a maniac like Snape.”

“Snape?”

“Yes, James saved his life back when we were at school. James tried to let him off for a thank you and three gills of Salvus potion – they’re a pig to brew. Hell, since it was mostly my fault, okay almost entirely my fault, and James and I hold our debts and obligations in common, he even tried to persuade Snape there was no life debt owed. But no, Snape got on his high horse about how he might only be a half-blood but he had more honour than that. And utterly refused to give in any
way at all that would let James accept the debt had been paid. Apparently only literally saving James’ life is good enough for Snape. Moron.”

“But isn’t that honourable?”

“Not really. If the person you owed the debt to insisted on that, then you wouldn’t have any choice. But to keep open a debt, it warps magic, and to do so wilfully is just… The honourable course of action, on both sides, is to resolve the debt as swiftly as possible. If there was something in particular you wanted they couldn’t supply you with you could accept a promise, which will conditionally settle the debt. For example a first born child.”

“I – what?”

“First born child, or son, is pretty standard. You could demand Bethan’s.”

“No.”

“Well I know you wouldn’t but they don’t,” Sirius jerked his thumb at the door and those waiting behind it.”

“They really think I could –” Harry swallowed hard against the need to throw up.

“They didn’t, but since you weren’t accepting Bethan’s mother’s offering, now they’re not so sure.”

“I would never,” Harry glared. He might occasionally, or indeed often, fantasize about burning down the entire wizarding world (except Sirius, always except Sirius – and James too, and also Neville obviously, and he had to make sure Rosmerta stayed around if only for her ability to make Sirius blush, and Bethan, well after all that effort saving her life not keeping her would be a waste and she’d grinned at him not in the least afraid, he liked her, and therefore Bethan’s mother, if she’d stop wailing, and then – the list of exceptions was starting to get unwieldy. This was all Sirius’ fault) but Harry was never, ever going to around stealing children like some sort of demented Rumplestiltskin.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Sirius caught his wrist. “I know you didn’t mean that. I know that’s not what you wanted.”


“Exactly,” he said, pleased, as if Harry had finally understood, when really Harry was more confused than ever. “Marriage was also a regular choice. Handsome prince rescues the princess, marries her and inherits her property. Or you marry the daughter of the person you rescued. Sometimes you have to wait for that until she grows up a bit.”

“What if she doesn’t want to?”

“Muggle stories must be quite different to wizard ones if the princess gets a choice.”

Now that he thought about it, Harry remembered the princess in question usually helpfully fell in love, which made him think about love potions – and he really was going to throw up any minute now.

Because now he was thinking about Ginny. And the way her family had encouraged them to have relationship. The way nobody was but Harry was right for her. The way it was all so suitable. Not because Harry was who they wanted but because Ginny owed Harry a life debt and her family had
no other way to pay it. Harry would have let it go with a thank you and a sweater, they had to know that, surely they knew that?

He’d even asked Bill about life debts but he’d been thinking about Pettigrew, and Bill, wait in retrospect Bill had been odd when he explained about life debts. He had been trying to tell him but Harry hadn’t been alert enough, hadn’t know how to ask the right questions. He’d been thinking about Pettigrew, and it hadn’t even occurred to him Ginny owed him for destroying the horcrux.

He remembered the day Ginny had told him she wanted to marry Michael Corner. She’d been scornful and angry, Harry hadn’t understood why but he’d offered her congratulations anyway and she’d been viciously pleased. Ron had apologized to him and Harry had thought it was because of Ron’s weird fixation on Harry and Ginny being a couple. It never occurred to him Ron thought he had some sort of right to marry Ginny.

And worst of all when Ginny was pregnant, Corner had joined Harry’s squad. Ron had asked for Corner to be taken on. Harry hadn’t wanted to, Ginny was pregnant, Corner shouldn’t be risking his life. But Ron had insisted, said Corner needed to make sure the baby would be safe. Harry hadn’t realized Ron meant safe from him.

Michael Corner had ended up in the Medical Wing lucky to keep his wand arm and Ginny, furious and tear-stricken, had stormed up to Harry demanding to know if that was enough for him, if he was finally satisfied. Harry still hadn’t understood but he’d stuttered out yes because he’d never been unsatisfied to begin with. And that was it. Corner left the squad and Ginny never spoke to him again. And Harry couldn’t blame her because he’d been an absolute bastard to her,

“But I didn’t mean to be,” he stammered, “I didn’t know, I swear I didn’t know.”

Sirius was holding him tightly. “It’s okay Harry, it’s okay.”

“It is not okay. But I didn’t know. I promise Sirius, I didn’t know.”

“And if they didn’t tell you, that’s on them, not you.”

Harry scrubbed at his eyes. “You don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t need to. I know you. And you’d never hold a life debt over someone’s head. If they were too proud to explain things, that’s not your fault.”

“I should have realized.”

“No. I know I tease you about being a muggle, but it’s true in a way. Expecting you know everything the way someone brought up wizard would is stupid. And cruel to you. Even some of the fiercest muggle-born advocates do it, as if it’s somehow insulting to explain how society works.” Abruptly Sirius drew back a step, “It’s not, is it? Lily always said she appreciated being told how things work. I’m not trying to force you to conform, I just, if people are going to judge you, you should at least know why, right?”

“Yes,” Harry grabbed at him. “I want to know. I’m sorry I got snippy. It never even occurred to me there was a debt. That Bethan might think I’d expect her to marry her.”

“That’s okay. I have it on good authority that the wizarding world is so elaborately absurd nobody in their right mind could expect to understand it on their first attempt.”

Harry didn’t see how anyone could ever understand the wizarding world. He clutched harder at Sirius. It felt like he was in one of those shops that sold fancy china and whichever way he turned
he was going to smash something.

Sirius’ clever fingers were stroking through Harry’s hair and it was inexpressibly soothing. Harry’s eyes were just fluttering closed, when he realized to his outrage Sirius was rubbing behind his ears exactly as if he was actually a cat, and it was too relaxing for him to even get annoyed about it.

“I’mma push you in the lake later,” he slurred.

“You do that, alley cat,” said Sirius, and there was way too much amusement in his voice. Harry was going to create a nice muddy swamp and one good shove – splish-squelch.

“You know,” Sirius continued, his voice soft and low, “playing the gallant rescuer is one of the more devious ways of forcing a woman to marry you because unless you make a total hash of things it’s very hard to prove that’s what you’ve done. Nobody’s ever tried that on the Blacks, for obvious reasons, but Melindora Black married an Avery in the fifteenth century and had one daughter Lyra before she died. To keep her mother’s portion in the family one of her Avery cousins created a life debt by rescuing Lyra from drowning, which is what happens when you’re extremely accidentally dumped off a broom into lake. She was only ten and her father had forbidden her to learn how to swim.”

“But surely –” Harry knew he was feeling dozy, but he didn’t see how that could possibly be fair.

“Oh everyone knew it was a cheat, but nobody could prove that. And she genuinely would have drowned if the Avery in question hadn’t pulled her out so it still counted. Since she was only ten, the Averys had to wait. And Lyra was a Black from the tip of her jet black hair to her pale pointy toes.”

“What did she do?”

“She found someone she wanted to marry instead. A Black actually. Corvus Black was her second cousin. Very correctly they asked if Lyra could marry Corvus instead, offering to leave her mother’s portion with the Avery family in exchange. And the Avery patriarch, who clearly had no idea who he was dealing with said no. And then he tried to have Corvus killed, which was when Corvus transformed into a crow and took off. The Averys thought they’d won and organized the wedding before the King himself and Lyra was married her rescuer. And they’d been married all of a minute when the reverend said and you may kiss the bride.”

“You make that sound ominous.”

“It was for the poor Avery bastard, he went down foaming at the mouth from the poison in her lipstick.”

“Good.”

“The Averys didn’t think so. The wedding party was split on whether she should be killed or if she should marry the next Avery in line, sans kissing. Lyra pointed out the life debt was fulfilled, she didn’t have to marry anyone. The Averys pointed out there were a lot more of them than her. Which was when a whole flock of black crows flew into the chapel and Corvus and his brothers appeared. Corvus asked the Averys if they wanted to owe him a life debt for not slaughtering them where they stood, or if they should get right on with the slaughtering.”

“He took your attitude to politics I see.”

Sirius grinned at the compliment, “So the Averys thought about it for all of thirty seconds and decided on balance they’d take the life debt. Corvus demanded to be allowed to marry Lyra and
they agreed. So Corvus and Lyra were married beside the still twitching corpse of her first husband.”

Harry grinned at the visual.

“After that they left for Italy to avoid any Avery attempt at vengeance and went on to become extremely successful condottori who felt Borgias just didn’t put in enough effort and Machiavelli was a bit of a wimp. Do not repeat the part about Machiavelli to James, or in fact even mention Machiavelli, unless you’re ready for a three hour lecture.”

“Not that the Averys didn’t deserve it, but isn’t that cheating a bit?”

“Yes but the Averys cheated first. Which was stupid of them. You can’t cheat magic. Not without consequences. Manipulating someone into a life debt never works out well but people will not learn. Somehow they forget it, or think they can get around it, or are plain stupid.”

“Or don’t have their family telling them cautionary tales?”

“Maybe not. It’s hard to be sure because I don’t have much to compare it to, but I don’t think the Blacks polish up their stories as much as the other families do. My paternal grandmother was a McMillain, and listening to her you wouldn’t have thought they put a foot wrong in six centuries.”

“What about the Potters?” Harry asked, and then wished he hadn’t because he had no excuse to be interested in them. But Sirius beamed at him, because Sirius loved the Potters and was always happy to talk about them.

“Oh the Potters, all their stories are really boring, I was riding along minding my own business blah-blah-countryside-sheep-blah-blah – and then the dragon fell out the sky dead, I married the princess’ maid because the princess was rather persnickety, and we rode off with our saddlebags full of gold. Oh and incidentally please see the below recipe for a dragon killing potion should you ever need one.”

Harry sniggered.

“See, boring.”

“How very dreadful.”

“Exactly,” said Sirius with a commendably straight face. “They were so boring they didn’t even make it into the Sacred Twenty-Eight, or twenty-nine I guess it would have been. The Potters have no sense of the dramatic at all. It’s embarrassing. A Black can make a production of popping to the shops for a pint of milk. A Potter could cross continents and time itself for the one they love and never even mention it.”

“Um,” said Harry.

“It was a Potter who originally invented the time turner. Jervis Potter and his wife Ceinwen were attacked by Reivers in the Scottish Borders and were rescued by an elderly wizard. After Ceinwen died years later, Jervis received a letter from himself telling him he needed to get on and create a time turner so he could go back in time and stop Ceinwen’s murder which had occurred in the original timeline. So he duly did, then came back to his own time and lived out the rest of his life without saying a thing about time travel. His children only figured it out when they read his notes. His grandson created the modified version of the time turner the Ministry have now.”

“That’s a lovely story.” Wizards did have happy stories after all. That was something of a relief.
“Yes, but boring. No bloody vengeance, or desperate oaths, or passionate declarations. Jervis should be ashamed to call himself a pureblood.”

Harry squinted at him. “You like that story. You like Jervis.”

“Well yeah,” Sirius smiled helplessly. “I should be ashamed of myself too. There’s something very restful about boring.”

Personally Harry figured Sirius calibration of boring was way, way off. But restful sounded good, hell even boring sounded good, though Harry found it hard to believe living with Sirius could ever manage boring. With a sigh he refocused on the problem,

“So Bethan, I could force her to marry me, and this would be considered acceptable?”

“Socially, or by me personally?” Sirius asked, carefully flippant. “Because there’s a bit of difference of opinion there.”

“I will never understand the wizarding world.”

“Sure you will. You just won’t like it.”

Harry shook his head. He wasn’t sure how Sirius managed to understand how things worked, and hold a dissenting opinion without giving himself a massive headache.

“With the choices available your marriage would be considered quite a neat solution. The family own a small shop with trading rights for Hogsmeade. You’d be settled securely, which for a nameless born-muggle would be doing very well for yourself. Bethan isn’t walking out with anyone at the moment and she’s getting a name for herself for being, uh, difficult? pushy? Whatever the current socially acceptable word is for having a mind of her own. She could use a husband who could protect her and cash the cheques her mouth keeps writing. Win-win-win. It would resolve things with honour all round. You might even get a ballad or two written about you, it’s so sparkily romantic.”

“Except for the part where I don’t want to marry Bethan and she doesn’t want to marry me?”

“Eh,” Sirius shrugged his shoulders. “Details.”

“You’re lucky I’m used to you, or I’d be feeling thoroughly insulted right now.”

It wasn’t insulting at all though. This was Sirius telling him all his choices, even if Sirius didn’t want him to marry Bethan and knew Harry didn’t want to either. It was still one of options other people expected him to be aware of, so Sirius was telling him about it to stop him tripping himself up. Harry loved Sirius an absolutely unreasonable amount.

“Hey, I told you this is the honourable solution. If you want to go dishonourable and insulting, you could jump straight into bed. Heck, given Bethan’s muttering about certain people just rolling over for the death eaters, they might throw you into bed together and watch you get on with it.”

Harry’s amusement was stripped away, “No,” he said. “Never again. I get to choose.”

Sirius blinked at him. “Of course you do.”

“My choice.”

“Harry,” Sirius touched his arm lightly. Harry twitched under the contact but didn’t bat it away and
Sirius brushed his fingers down Harry’s arm until he could clasp his hand. “Harry you always get to choose. I’m sorry if anything I said made you think different.”

The nervous snap of energy beneath his skin faded away. Harry scrubbed at his hair with his free hand. “No I’m sorry. I know that. I don’t know why I went weird for a minute. I’m sorry.”

Sirius looked very sad but he drew Harry in close. “You have nothing to be sorry for. We were talking about something ugly. I shouldn’t have been making a joke of it.”

“That’s okay,” Harry rested his head against Sirius’ shoulder. “Sometimes all you can do is joke. Could I really just – demand to sleep with Bethan?”

“Yes. Oh not indefinitely, maybe a month or so. That would be dishonourable though, for you and Bethan. It’s probably what Bethan’s mother is most afraid of. You being a rough and ready muggle, you could vanish back into the muggle world and Bethan would be stuck. She’d have a hard time finding someone to marry her after that. Chasity before marriage isn’t essential but the appearance of it is. Of course if you left the debt open, nobody would ever marry her, too much risk of you showing up and claiming on the debt.”

“I hate all this. Can’t someone just do something nice?”

“Magic doesn’t work like that. That’s why we have, not rules precisely, but suggestions. For Bethan and her mother the offer of handkerchiefs, as ridiculous as it seems to you, you muggle –”

“Hey!”

“Are you telling me you don’t find our handkerchiefs ridiculous?”

“Um.”

“Exactly. I have explained things before to people brought up muggle, you know. I honestly think they find blood rituals less disturbing than carrying a handkerchief.”

“Well sure,” said Harry, because while blood rituals were alarming they at least made sense. The need to always have a clean handkerchief did not.

Sirius groaned. “Am I going to have to argue handkerchiefs with you? Because Lily was exhausting enough.”

“What did you say?”

“The plan was not to say anything because I have more sense than to involve myself in a domestic argument. But James, the idiot, said if Lily didn’t wish to carry a handkerchief then she didn’t have to, because Lily could whatever she goddamn wanted.”

“Not really seeing the problem with that.”

“The problem, as I explained to Lily, was that James would spend the next sixty years defending her position which was all fine and dandy except that, since I was the dueller of the two of us, I would spend the next sixty years with a stack of dawn appointments and I wasn’t getting out of bed early for the next sixty years because of handkerchiefs. That last part was a lie obviously, if Lils had really wanted me to I would have, but I’d have reserved the right to bitch about it. A lot.”

Harry grinned at Sirius’ sulky face. Lifting the hand he was still holding, he kissed Sirius’ fingers. “And did that convince her?”
“She said she couldn’t believe there was all this fuss over handkerchiefs, it was the absurdist thing she’d ever heard of, and I said if it was all absurd to her couldn’t she just carry a handkerchief anyway. I know they’re mostly used for showing off but it’s more than that, it’s a sign you have worth to show off.”

Harry didn’t understand it at all, but he did understand it was important, “So she agreed?”

“Yes. She decided it was like a religious symbol and got really enthusiastic and had a whole selection made up. When they blew up Odgkins Curiosities in Diagon Alley, she handed out fifteen handkerchiefs to survivors. All the purebreds who weren’t actual death eaters stopped giving James shit about having married her then. I’m not sure if they were impressed or terrified, but Jay was very, very smug.”

Harry was definitely missing something but he didn’t care. If handkerchiefs were somehow the way to acceptance, he’d keep them in his pockets no problem at all.

“You don’t have to carry to handkerchiefs if you don’t want to.” Sirius looked deeply unhappy at the idea though. “Society doesn’t see you as important enough to bother with, not carrying a handkerchief will just confirm that. Hell, some of the fiercest blood purists don’t think muggle-borns should be allowed to carry handkerchiefs at all. They should stick with their flimsy paper which is all they’re good for.”

In the back of his mind Harry wondered why Ron hadn’t tried that argument on Hermione because nothing worked better than telling her she couldn’t do something, especially if it was because she was a muggle-born.

It also worked on Harry.

“I’m more than good enough to carry a handkerchief,” he said.

“Of course you are. So if Bethan and her mother are offering you handkerchiefs it’s recognition and it’s good. People should recognize your value. And really, you did save Bethan. Bethan’s mother, she feels overwhelmingly grateful to you, shouldn’t she be allowed to express that, instead of having it hanging over like a dread obligation for the rest of her life. If some stranger saved you, wouldn’t you want to pay them back?”

Harry hadn’t considered it like that before. It made everything slightly more tolerable.

“But what about everyone else. We saved them too, or your wards did.”

“Hush up about the wards, I’m hoping that slips by. They were for Rosmerta and we already did a deal. Everyone else, well, you’ll need to be careful if you ask for a favour because they’ll do their absolute best to fulfil it and little things like sanity and legality will go by the wayside. But fortunately nobody else was saved as clearly and directly as Bethan.”

“What about that family you rescued? From their burning house?”

“I’m hoping everyone will forget about that,” Sirius’ shoulders hunched up and he fidgeted miserably.

And somehow more than anything Sirius has said before it was this shamed embarrassment that brought home to Harry that saving someone’s life truly was a big deal and not wizards being absurd.

“No they were definitely there too. All huddled up together, clutching their children.” Harry parsed
that and, “You could take the children?”

“One of them, maybe two if I wanted to push it. Or the wife for a week or so – traditionally. I guess they might think I’d ask for the husband.” Sirius looked sick, like he hated himself for it even being an option.

“That’s not your fault.” Harry reminded him. Sirius grumbled and folded in on himself. Harry was suddenly thankful all he has to deal with are handkerchiefs. “What are you going to do? Their house just burned down, they haven’t anything left. You can’t –”

“I know. I have no idea what I am going to do. I was hoping they’d decide I wasn’t worth honouring with the debt. It’s not that the debt disappears, but you owe them so much for not running you out of town that it cancels things out.”

Harry bit down on a hot rush of fury. He didn’t care how awkward it made things, he was not letting anyone get away with that excuse. But at the same time, “How can saving someone’s life be so technical?”

“We’re wizards. We can make cleaning our teeth technical. Are you ready to go say thank you for the handkerchiefs?”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’re avoiding discussing the subject of your life debt.”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” said Sirius, misery folded away behind flash and charm.

Harry fixed him with a narrow look.

Sirius squirmed, and the flashy charm faltered, “Come on, can’t keep your adoring public waiting.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Everyone knows that.”

“I will push you into a swamp.”

“And on that point,” Sirius reopened the kitchen door. Harry wasn’t going to argue with Sirius in public but he made a note that it was going to be a very sulphury swamp.
Multiple conversations clearly snapped off as Harry followed Sirius back into the main room. Bethan’s mother smiled timidly. Harry took a deep breath and put on his game face.

“Good morning Mrs Wilding. I’m sorry for early. I didn’t quite understand.”

Her smile grew a little more solid. “So, I would ask that you accept this small offering in thanks for the life of my daughter.” She held out the heap of handkerchiefs neatly tied up in a dark green ribbon.

Harry picked them up. “Thank you,” he said politely. They were smart white squares, and in one corner a neat H was chain-stitched. She must have been up all night. “You didn’t need to –” he started, but then Sirius stood on his foot so he shut up.

“Thank you for your kindness,” said Sirius, “there is no debt between us.”

Harry was ready to repeat the formula, but Mrs Wilding spoke first,

“Oh no, I have another,” she took out another set of handkerchiefs tied up in a silver ribbon. “Bethan said that Lord Black, that is that things were formal between you and Lord Black.” Her eyes flitted from him to Sirius.

Harry grinned because he knew what she meant, he was finally getting the hang of the wizarding world. “Yes,” he said proudly. “Sirius gave me gloves.” He held out his gloved hands for inspection.

Mrs Wilding smiled indulgently, “Yes, I see. So it seemed appropriate to,” she held out the second set of handkerchiefs. Her face wavered a bit as Harry reached out for them, so he dropped his hands and glanced back to Sirius for help. Stupid wizarding world that kept coming up with new rules.

Sirius looked stunned. He stretched out one hand, “For me,” he checked.

“Yes,” Mrs Wilding straightened up. “That is, is it not correct?”

“Oh,” Sirius looked at Harry. You’re the one who gets to make that decision. Is the Wilding family’s debt to you discharged by a gift to me?”

Oh, it wasn’t Harry being stupid, it was Sirius. Harry might not have got it but the family part gave it away. Mrs Wilding was offering a gift to Harry and his family, and she meant Sirius. She was acting as if Sirius was in a formal relationship with Harry, and Sirius wasn’t sure if he should agree.

“You moron,” said Harry. Sirius face dropped. “You double moron. Of course a gift to you works. It’s even better, because it’s a gift to you.” Sirius deserved everything, he should definitely have all the gifts.

Mrs Wilding smiled. She had known that, that was the point of her gesture. Suddenly Harry really did get it. He’d thought the whole thing was absurd because how could a gift of things repay saving Behan’s life. Not that Harry wanted repaying, but if you were going to fuss over repayment,
why would you think a bunch of handkerchiefs would do the trick.

But it wasn’t just the handkerchiefs, it was recognition. This was recognition that Sirius was important and important to Harry. Given the wizarding world didn’t really grasp same-sex relationships, that was huge. Harry glanced at Sirius who was accepting his pile of handkerchiefs with shaky hands. The public acknowledgement had left Sirius looking shy, and Harry wanted to wrap him up in blankets until he wasn’t so obviously raw. This was something Harry could never have given him (at least not without a lot of Imperius and it seemed like Sirius would frown on that). He turned to Mrs Wilding, desperately grateful,

“Thank you for your kindness, there is no debt between us,” he said, and meant it with his whole heart.

Mrs Wilding took his shaking hands in hers and smiled back at him. “Thank you, my lord.”

“Oh I’m not a lord,” Harry disclaimed quickly.

Mrs Wilding bowed her head but didn’t actually say anything. Harry wanted to argue the point but it would have felt too much like bullying. Really he just wanted to settle into the background. Fortunately Sirius, who even off-balance couldn’t seem to help being dramatic, took all the attention from him when he swept a low bow to Mrs Wilding.

“You do me honour,” he said. He took one of the handkerchiefs and turned it through his clasped hands. It began to gleam with Sirius’ magic and when he unclasped his hands the white cotton handkerchief was a silky grey shot through with black, Sirius’ colours. He twisted the handkerchief into a strand and knotted the magic in place, then handed it to Mrs Wilding.

“With my thanks.”

“I,” Mrs Wilding looked at it helplessly for a second then tucked it carefully away in her pocket. “Thank you my lord.”

Harry reached for his own stack of handkerchiefs ready to give her one of his, but Sirius stood on his foot again so Harry figured that was inappropriate for some wizardly reason he knew not. Everyone else seemed happy enough as a collective sigh of relief and satisfaction seemed to whistle around the room.

“Well done,” said an older wizard peering out at them from half-moon spectacles. His heavy black velvet robes swished as he walked towards them, “I have rarely seen a debt settled with such honour by all parties.”

“Mr Probert,” Sirius startled, “I didn’t know you were coming here, sir.”

Harry reluctantly downgraded the threat level at the honorific but remained wary as Sirius remained cautious.

“It’s good to see you too Sirius,” Mr Probert’s lips pursed into a near-smile.

“Oh, yes, good to see you sir. Did James call you?”

Mr Probert chuckled, “No. No, no, my boy, there is nothing amiss. No more than there ever is.”

“Mr Probert is the Potter family solicitor,” Sirius explained. “He’s kind enough to help me out on occasion. The Black family’s traditional solicitors were –”
“Now, now, nothing actionable my boy. Shall we say they are a little overenthusiastic in some matters?”

“Yeah, let’s say that.”

Mr Probert tutted. He produced a handkerchief with a flick of his wrist and removed his glasses to wipe the lenses.

Sirius glanced around the room and caught sight of the little family still huddled together in the corner of the room watching everything with anxious eyes. Although Sirius didn’t visibly move, Harry was standing close enough to feel him cringe. Sirius clapped his hands together and smiled at the room, wide and fake.

“So has everybody’s curiosity been satied for the moment. Can we have breakfast without an audience?”

“Well Lord Black, we were hoping for a moment of your time,” said one of the crowd. He was wearing a plain shirt and trousers like the rest of the men but over the top he wore a robe of dull orange heavily embroidered with navy blue thread. In fact most of the crowd had smartened themselves up with robes, although orange and blue was definitely the most extravagant example.

Sirius’ smile grew faker but he inclined his head graciously, “How may I assist you Master Colby.”

That appeared to be a difficult question. Colby stammered something unintelligible as everyone else shuffled their feet. Finally Rosmerta stepped forward,

“They have heard about our business arrangement, Lord Black. I was booking in Ketterwicks to repoint the kitchen charms and they were concerned about the source of my funds.” She rubbed her thumb nervously against her lip. Harry figured she was stuck between apologizing for everyone finding out, and worrying that implying it was supposed to be a secret would make things worse. He was not surprised when Sirius waved the whole issue away.

“That’s fine Madam Rosmerta, it was an investment, I expected the money to be spent. Although I am surprised so many people see fit to express an opinion on our private affairs.” He narrowed his eyes at the wizard in orange and blue who, wringing his hat in his hands, stammered out,

“I, no, my apologies Lord Black, but we though if you were looking for investment opportunities perhaps you might be prepared to consider other applications. I myself have been wanting to expand and build another –” a low slow hiss rippled around the room and orange and blue man collected a whole host of glares for launching into his spiel ahead of everyone else. He faltered for a moment before soldiering on to describe the extra floor he wanted to add to his shop.

Sirius was already leaning forward in encouragement, his face open, welcoming, ready to help – and Harry stepped on Sirius’ foot.

“You’ll need to speak to Lord Black’s solicitor,” he said firmly before the irritating man could unthinkingly agree. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t Mr Probert, to go through Madam Rosmerta’s agreement?”

“Yes indeed young man. I, ah, did take the precaution of clearing my day. Experience has shown that dealing with our young Lord Black’s affairs has a tendency to take somewhat longer than anticipated.”

“Mr P!” protested Sirius indignanty.
Mr Probert smiled to himself and polished his glasses some more.

“Of course, of course,” said orange and blue man hastily. “Happy to speak to the lawyer.”

“And Madam Rosmerta,” said Harry, glaring at the line knowing at least some of them were people who’d sneered at Sirius when they could but had now come round to whine for money. He’d happily tell them all _hell no_ but he knew Sirius wouldn’t agree. He could already hear all Sirius’ arguments about how fear made people react badly and the need to help those suffering because of the death eaters. He wouldn’t be wrong, Harry just didn’t care. Nobody was going to take blatant advantage of Sirius while he was there. They could have their help but they’d pay for it properly, not the easy terms Sirius gave Rosmerta because she was his friend.

“Uh,” Sirius looked confused.

“Rosmerta will have a much better idea which plans are reasonable and what sort of interest should be charged.”

“Um.”

“After all nobody here wants to take advantage, do they?” Harry smiled toothily at the crowd.

There was a lot of hasty shaking of heads.

“And you have that meeting with Madam Bones soon, Sirius. I’m sure Madam Rosmerta wouldn’t mind looking after this for you.”

“Rosie?” Sirius asked.

Madam Rosmerta was smiling too. It was the sort of smile Harry appreciated, easy and vindictive. “Of course I’m happy to help you Sirius. Mr Probert will be here to look after your interests but I’m happy to give him the benefit of my advice when it comes to Hogsmeade.”

Sirius wasn’t looking at the crowd, but Harry was. He was thrilled to see several people look decidedly queasy. Another subset of the crowd though appeared meanly pleased at the idea, so Harry was happy to think some overdue justice was about to be handed out. It would have to do anyway because Sirius wasn’t going to let him actually torment anyone which was just unfair.

“If you’re sure,” said Sirius.

“Absolutely,” said Rosmerta. “I’m very grateful you could help me out. I’m more than happy to help you with this. If that’s all right with Mr Probert?”

Mr Probert put his spectacles back on. “Delighted my dear. I’m sure we shall deal extremely well together.” His smile wasn’t as easy as Rosmerta’s but it was sharp enough for Harry’s tastes. “It’s always sensible to have information from one on the ground so to speak.” He held out his arm to her and Rosmerta linked hers with his. “Now if you could show me a suitable place to set up shop as it were, I will put up the appropriate privacy charms.”

Sirius looped his arm around Harry’s waist and leaned close to speak quietly in his ear,

“That was a great idea thank you. I wouldn’t have known what to say to their requests.”

Harry did not say, _you would have said yes to everything you idiot_, but it was a close run thing. Instead he said, “Mr Probert and Rosmerta have it all under control.”
“Poor old Mr P. I give him no end of trouble. James’ dad called him in when I ran away and they somehow got my family to back off. And when Uncle Alphard left me most of his money Mr P made sure I actually inherited it. And when everything went wrong with Alec at my family’s lawyers, James and Mr P got everything sorted out and moved the Black accounts to Mr P. Which was nice of him because he always swore he’d never work for any of the sodding twenty-eight. His parents got screwed over by that little club and Mr P hates them. He’s not very impressed with me either but fortunately he likes the Potters a lot.”

Most of the crowd had cluttered over to one side of the room forming an impromptu line. The family Sirius had saved, and was now trying to ignore, had stayed huddled up together in a corner, and Abeforth Dumbledore now stumped forward. Sirius nudged Harry slightly behind him,

“Abeforth, is there something we can help you with?” His voice had gone fake again, “I find it hard to believe you are in need of a loan? I quite thought the Hog’s Head falling down was your end goal.”

“Very funny Black. No I’m not here for a loan. I’m here because you seem ready to do something instead of cowering with your hands over your eyes.”

“Hey!” Harry objected. He pressed close to Sirius as Sirius’ whole body locked up tight at the criticism.

Abeforth ignored him, “If you are finally ready to step up, I thought you might agree to fund some wards for the village.”

“Wards for the village?” Sirius shook his head, “Even if I bought into every business in town, I still couldn’t power wards for the whole village.”

“Oh good Merlin,” snarled Abeforth. “Save me from wizards overly impressed with their own power. Nobody could power wards for the whole village Black, not even my esteemed brother. I was talking about you putting your hand in your pocket and paying the goblins to lay some down.”

Harry glowered, “Why should Sirius pay for that?”

“Some would say he owes it.”

“Only very stupid someones. Sirius doesn’t owe anything to anybody.”

“Alley cat,” warned Sirius.

“It’s true. What would James say?”

Abeforth snorted, “Everyone knows Potter’s soft on him.”

“That hasn’t anything to do with anything,” said Harry. “Sirius doesn’t have to help anybody. So why should he?” He folded his arms and glared. Harry knew perfectly Sirius would end up paying for whatever fancy wards were required but he saw no reason to make it easy. Sirius was going to be doing them a favour and he wasn’t going to let them pretend it was a nothing.

“There isn’t the money in the village to pay for a decent set of wards up front. And nobody’s going to borrow money from the goblins if they like having arms and legs. So if Black puts up the money, he could charge them a tax. Say a sickle a month per household.”

Harry was not great at maths, or wizarding economics, but he knew that couldn’t possibly cover the cost of goblin wards until years had passed.
“Right,” he said, “A sickle a month and once you-know-who is gone they’ll all grumble endlessly about an unfair charge, and that’s assuming they agree in the first place.”

Abeforth was twinkling at him. It was annoyingly like Dumbledore.

“What?” Harry demanded, aggravated.

“You said when.”

“What?”

“When, when you-know-who’s arse is kicked. And look around you.” With Sirius, Harry tuned to see the whole queue watching them with naked hope. And maybe Harry understood why Sirius had a hard time saying no. Even the first couple sitting down with Mr Probert had turned to see what Sirius’ answer would be. Sirius sighed,

“Every household will contribute?”

Thacker stepped forward and looked up and down the line getting nods of agreement. “Oh please,” begged someone before being shushed.

“These won’t be like the wards on the Three Broomsticks,” Sirius warned, “I’ll have to hire goblins. And they’ll be the standard ward set. Nothing fancy.”

“Anything is better than nothing, my lord,” said Thacker, “and goblin wards are fierce.”

“You’ll need to talk to the Mayor into agreeing.”

“Not a problem.”

“And we’ll need somewhere to, oh, oh that is a brilliant idea. Abeforth you are a brilliant man. I shall tell everyone those rumours about you are actually about your brother.”

Abeforth laughed, “You do that anyway.”

“Yes but that’s because I hate the Headmaster, from now on it will be because you are brilliant.” Sirius grinned at Abeforth, glowing with delight.

Harry grumbled internally because Sirius wasn’t supposed to look like that at other people. He flexed his hand and wished for his cat claws to stick somewhere inconvenient.

“Careful Black, you’ll quite turn my head,” said Abeforth. “Also your muggle is looking like a thundercloud.”

Sirius turned back to Harry, “Harry love? Is something wrong?”

And, no, Harry did not like the shadows darkening Sirius’ face.

“No,” he said smiling determinedly. “I’m all set to listen to my boyfriend being brilliant.”

“Nope, I’m not brilliant. This is all Abeforth’s plan.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Abeforth. “This has nothing to do with me. You go to your destruction in your own way. Same as ever.”

“Hey,” said Harry. “Nobody’s getting destroyed.”
“Exactly,” Sirius kissed him, then yanked him towards the back of the room where the family he’d saved was still huddled together. The family, mother, father, son, daughter – thankfully they’d left the baby with someone else – all stared at Sirius like he was Voldemort himself come for tea. Harry wanted to shout at them, but even he could figure that wasn’t going to help anything.

Sirius pulled out a chair and seated himself at the family’s table. Harry hovered awkwardly behind, which allowed him to catch the boy when his face hardened and he got away from his mother’s anxious clutch to fling himself at Sirius, tiny fists flailing.

“You can’t take Amy away, I won’t let you.”

As Harry crouched down to pin the thrashing limbs, his first impulse was to sit the boy down and explain about targeted strikes because this was just sloppy. A banshee yowl and then the little girl landed on Harry’s back shrieking,

“Leave Nico alone.” She got a couple of kicks into his kidneys which was a definite improvement.

The parents were yelling for the children to stop but Harry couldn’t really follow it because he was busy making sure the little girl didn’t fall off his back and the boy didn’t twist wrong and wrench his skinny arms.

“Quiet!” demanded Sirius. Both children gulped and went still. That was Sirius’ classroom voice Harry realized, and now he wanted to see Sirius teaching. Maybe Sirius would let him hang around and watch.

“Lord Black, I’m so sorry,” the mother looked ready to dissolve into tears.

“You may be sure I’ll deal with them,” said the father, his hands reaching out, his face stern.

“No –” Harry started, because no, the children were tiny, maybe six and eight. It wasn’t their fault they didn’t understand.

“I said quiet!”

Harry stopped talking without even meaning to do so. Both parents went quiet too.

“Now,” Sirius continued, “there is no reason for all this fuss.” He reached out and picked the girl off Harry’s back. “Your name is Amy?”

“Yes sir,” she stammered, big-eyed with awe.

“That’s a lovely name. It’s nice to meet you Amy,” Sirius sat her down next to him and the chair helpfully expanded to make room. He turned to the boy still loosely held in Harry’s arms, “And you’re Nico?”

“Yes sir. I’m sorry sir.”

“No, it’s good that you wanted to protect your little sister, but you should make sure it’s necessary first.” He picked Nico up and sat him on his other side as the chair again helpfully stretched out.

“You mean you’re not going to steal us away?” asked Nico. “Because it should be me. It was my fault.”

“It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anybody’s fault except you-know-who and those who follow him. And I’m not going to steal anybody away. Do you know how much work children are? They’re
always getting themselves muddy and they need feeding constantly. And clothes I bet your mum makes all your clothes.”

“Uh huh,” agreed Nico. “But they all burned up. Everything burned up. Even my new shirt for Halloween. Sebby cried all night for his lambie cos it was burned up too. But I’m a big boy. We’re staying with Mrs Mackenzie and she let me have this shirt that used to belong to her little boy but it’s not as nice as my new shirt was. Mum said it’s going to take months before we’re respect’ble again.”

“Exactly,” said Sirius. “Children are far too much trouble to steal away.”

“My mum says I’m trouble. She says; Nicholas Christopher, you are more trouble than a sackful of kneazles.”

“Oooh,” Sirius cooed obligingly, “that’s lots of trouble.”

“I’m trouble too,” Amy claimed quickly. “Mum says; Amelia Marie, you are in trouble now young lady.”

“Well there you go,” said Sirius. “What on earth would I do with two such terrible hellions?” He hugged two sets of skinny shoulders. “I’d be in fear of my life.”

“Yeah,” enthused Nico, clearly taken with the idea.

Amy, on the other hand, looked concerned. She patted Sirius ribs. “We wouldn’t hurt you Mr Black, you’re nice.”

“Lord Black,” hissed her mother. She was somehow managing to look both tearful, and horrified at all the breaches of etiquette occurring around her.

“Call me Sirius,” said Sirius. “And I am nice, lots of people fail to realize this though.” He was looking at the parents as he said it. The father smiled sheepishly back, while the mother looked cautiously hopeful.

“Lots of people are mean,” agreed Amy gravely. “Don’t worry though Lord Sirius. We won’t let anybody be mean to you, I promise.”

Nico nodded firmly. “I promise too.”

“Nico’s awfully brave,” said Amy in her sibling’s support.

“Nico needs to learn targeted strikes,” muttered Harry. Sirius grinned at him over the children’s heads and blew him a kiss that fluttered across the air between them to land gently on Harry’s cheek.

“That’s good,” said Sirius. “Now, since we have established I am not in habit of stealing children,” Harry reached over and gripped Sirius’ shoulder because the careful blankness of his voice was more of a tell than if it had trembled with hurt, “perhaps we can move on to discuss matters further.”

The father ducked his head, “Yes Lord Black.”

Amy patted Sirius’ ribs again, “Lord Sirius?” she asked in a failed attempt at a whisper, “what does that mean?”
“It means that since I helped you when your house burned down, I’d like your parents to help me with something.”

“Me and Nico can help too.”

“Of course you can. I’ll need all your help. You’re going to have to be very grown up.”

“I’m almost nine,” said Nico proudly, as if that should somehow be convincing.

“I’m six,” Amy admitted, “but I’m going to be nine.”

Harry looked at her face squinched up with determination and did not want to be the one to tell her she had to be seven and eight first.

“Of course you are,” said Sirius. “So are you grown up enough not to do something just because you’re friends say you should?”

Harry snorted.

“Harry? Something to say?”

“Pot kettle,” grumbled Harry, because it was entirely obvious that Sirius would do anything James asked without a second thought.

“That’s different,” said Sirius. He sniffled, “And you’re very hurtful.”

Harry didn’t understand for a second, and worried he actually had hurt Sirius. Then he was being glared at by two sets of angry child eyes and,

“Oh that is cheating, Black.”

Sirius grinned at him.

“You should say sorry,” said Amy.

“Yeah,” agreed Nico. “If you hurt someone you should apologize.”

Harry was going to murder Sirius and he hoped his face was conveying that with extreme prejudice. But he couldn’t stand up to Sirius’ little protectors and their tiny stern faces,

“I’m very sorry I ever implied you might have some sense in your overly pretty head.”

Sirius grin grew wider, “Love you too.”

Fortunately, as Harry intended, the children missed most of what he said, only really catching the I’m sorry which had them both beaming in approval. Amy looked up at at Sirius.

“He is very pretty, isn’t he Mr Harry?”

“Yes he is,” Harry agreed, scenting an ally.

“Nah,” said Nico. “Lord Sirius is badass.”

“Nicholas Christopher,” yelled his mother, mortified beyond her ability to hang onto her company manners.

“He is,” said Nico sulkily.
“Wherever did you hear that word?”

“Everyone says it.”

Harry leaned against Sirius and whispered, “My pretty badass.”

“Killing you later,” Sirius hissed quietly through his teeth.

“Not if I get there first,” teased Harry, kissing Sirius’ ear and then darting away before Sirius could retaliate.

“Cheater,” muttered Sirius.

“Me?” Harry demanded, outraged.

“Apologize to Lord Sirius right this instant,” the mother ordered, and it took Harry a moment to realize she was talking to her son and not to him.

“Being a badass as is a good thing,” insisted Nico.

“Nicholas Christopher!”

Sirius coughed loudly. “I think we’ve wandered off the point. Now – I’m sorry I’m not sure of your names?”

“Christien and Amélie Davingon,” said the father. “We moved over from France. Amélie was a Blanchefleur.”

That clearly meant something to Sirius. He sucked his teeth and looked again at the mother, who blinked soggily back somehow both hopeful and resigned.

“Mr and Mrs Davingon, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Amélie looked more hopeful and she sat up, the slump in her shoulders straightening out.

“You too, Lord Black,” said Christien.

“Thank you. Now, the fact is the death eater raid has emphasized the vulnerability of the village to attack and the suggestion has been made to set up wards that would keep the Death Eaters out.”

“Like on the Three Broomsticks?”

“Not quite the same. The ones on the Three Broomsticks are my own personal wards. These would be laid down by the goblins. However in order to do so they will need to place a heartstone. The difficulty is its location needs to be secure, so we’re looking at somebody’s house. Now we could dig up someone’s basement, but since your house needs to be rebuilt, I thought that, with your permission, we could rebuild it around the heartstone.”

“Of course,” said Christien immediately.

“The central wardstone in our house? Would that be safe?” asked Amélie.

“As long as you respected it,” said Sirius. “If you mess with it, you’ll take down the wards at best. At worst it will explode.” He looked down at Nico and Amy, “That’s why you’re important. You must make sure not to let anybody see the heartstone. Not even if they’re your friends. Anybody who asks to see the stone is risking the safety of the whole village.”
“I won’t let anybody near it,” Nico promised.

“Me too,” agreed Amy.

“Not even if you’re friends tell you you’re being silly scaredy cats?”

“Not even then,” said Nico. “I’m not going to let anyone else’s house burn down.”

“Anybody does ask to see the stone, you come and tell me,” said his father. “Anyone willing to risk all our safety like that needs speaking to. And if it’s one of your friends their parents will be speaking to them.”

“Yes father.”

“But if it’s not safe,” whispered Amélie, “what happens if we’re attacked again?”

“Mel, you don’t understand,” her husband put his arm around her shoulders to speak quietly to her. “That close to the central wardstone, they wouldn’t be able to get into the house no matter what they try. Even if we left all the door and windows open, no enemy could make it inside, not if the wards were strong enough to stretch out clear across the village.” He glanced at Sirius, “Your pardon Lord Black, I know a little of warding. A cousin of mine is trained in the art in a small way. House wards. Nothing as grand as this.”

“That’s good,” said Sirius. “You’ll know how to treat a heartstone. Perhaps your cousin could join us to be sure everything runs smoothly. Goblins and wizards do not always communicate as well as they could, a trained ward-setter would be a help.”

“Thank you my Lord, I will write to him immediately.”

“They wouldn’t be able to get in?” Amélie persisted. “Not at all?”

“No. They wouldn’t be able to fire the place either. It couldn’t happen again.”

“Oh,” Amélie hastily hid her face in her hands.

“Mummy!” cried Amy and Sirius had to catch her before she tumbled out the chair. Amélie dropped out of her own chair to wrap her arms around her daughter and bury her face in her hair.

“Mum?” asked Nico, suddenly unsure.

“I’m fine,” she swiped at her eyes. “I’m fine. I’m just happy, baby.”

“Mu-um, I’m not a baby.”

Nico got violently hugged and then Amélie was sitting back in her seat almost composed.

“So I understand why we would want the wardstone in our home,” she said. “But I’m not sure how we’re doing Lord Black a favour, because I tell you I would beg on my knees for such a gift as to never again see my house in flames with my children inside.”

“Mel,” complained her husband. And Harry was proud because he’d got this, he understood. Amélie was destroying the carefully constructed illusion that Sirius was receiving something in compensation for rescuing them from the fire.

“It’s a lot of work,” Sirius hedged shiftily. “Your husband will know more about that. And it will take up a lot of space. And you will need to be careful of the children. The wards will keep out
those who intend harm but they’ll not keep out curious children who could do as much damage without meaning to.”

“Indeed,” agreed Christien.

Amélie looked at them both, and Harry could see the moment she got it. “Oh,” she said, “oh.” She smudged at her eyes again. “I’m alright.” She took a deep breath, then leaned forward and put her hands on Sirius shoulders.

“Lord Black, your generosity is only exceeded by your graciousness. You will always be welcome in my home.” She pressed her lips gently to each of Sirius’ cheeks before sitting back.

He blinked a couple of times his eyes too fragile and his skin too pale, “I, thank you,” he twisted uncomfortably in his seat. “Really you’re doing me a favour, placing a heartstone can be terribly awkward.”

“As you say Lord Black.”

“So, I’ll get Mr Probert to contact the goblins, we’ll get the stone placed and then have them rebuild your house. Perhaps you could think about any changes in structure you might want.”

“Wait, you’ll have the goblins rebuild our house,” now Christien looked one step from keeling over.

“Well it makes sense,” said Sirius. “If they’re setting the heartstone in place they might as well build the house around it.”

“But,”

“Goblin constructed buildings are only one step below Dwarven, and nobody’s managed to convince the dwarves to build for them since the Age of Merlin,” Sirius said to Harry.

“Right,” agreed Christien faintly.

“But if I’m going to visit, then obviously only the finest construction will do,” Sirius said grandly.

Amélie ducked her head and smiled sugar sweet, “As you say Lord Black.” She nudged her husband with her elbow, “Smile and say thank you Chris.”

“Thank you Lord Black,” he repeated blankly, then a little more steadily, “you will always be welcome in my home.” He held out his wand hand and Sirius shook it firmly.

“Me too, me too,” insisted Nico, so they did the whole ritual again with first Nico and then Amy, Sirius collecting one earnest little handshake and one slightly sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“I won’t hold them to it,” Sirius promised the proudly watching parents.

“Don’t be foolish Lord Black, they’ll be pleased to welcome you whenever you choose to honour them with your presence,” said Amélie.

Sirius looked completely unable to compute such a concept. “No really,” he tried. “It was wrong to even hold to the debt, when you-know-who wouldn’t even be an issue if I had only –”

Harry hissed in fury, but Amélie was already there,

“Lord Black! Please cease being so absurd immediately. As you said yourself, nobody is to blame
for you-know-who except you-know-who himself.”

“Exactly,” said Harry. “And he’s going to regret it.”

Sirius huffed in frustration, “You don’t understand.”

“I understand perfectly,” Harry snapped back. There was a lot more he wanted to say but he didn’t want to yell in front of most of Hogsmeade, so he clenched his fists and took a few deep breaths until he felt less likely to explode.

“I’m sorry,” said Sirius. “I should, I mean I will –” he stopped and then restarted, “let’s all agree that you-know-who should –” then broke off again as Nico began to wriggle around in his seat. “Did you have a question, Nico?”

“Yeah, do you know what you-know-who’s name is, Lord Black? I’ve asked lots of people but nobody will tell me. But you’re a Lord, you must know.”

“Now that’s a tricky question,” Sirius began. He glanced across at the parents.

“You mean you don’t know.” Nico looked dismayed at this lapse in knowledge in his new idol.

Sirius tilted his head and Amélie made a go ahead gesture. Sirius nodded and said,

“I do, of course, as does everyone here,” said Sirius, “but we don’t use it.”

“Why not?”

Harry snuck a quick glance at the crowd. They were all shifting uncomfortably and lowering their heads to avoid catching each other’s eyes. A couple of people were looking longingly at the door.

“Because you-know-who’s name is one he chose himself. He even chose to make himself a Lord while he was at it. Which is very much not the done thing, let me tell you.”

“No,” said Nico. “Because lords rescue people like you did, they don’t set fire to people’s houses.”

“Lords are people too, Nico, so some of them are mean too. But you-know-who isn’t even a real lord, he just likes to pretend he is to make himself feel important.”

“That’s stupid,” said Nico.

“Yes it is. And it’s a very silly name.”

“A silly name?”

“Yep. He picked the name Voldemort. Have you ever heard a sillier name than that?”


“Yes it does,” agreed Sirius, while Christien and Amélie stared at their son with horror and hilarity combined. Not to be left out Amy oinked a couple of times which Nico responded to with a couple of snuffly snorts of his own and they were both laughing loudly.

“See,” said Sirius when they calmed down again. “It’s a very silly name. And we don’t use it because Voldemort is a mean person who sets fire to people’s houses. I bet you don’t like it when strangers call you ‘that boy’ instead of Nico?”
Nico shook his head.

"Exactly. We like to be called by our names. But Voldemort is a mean person and we don’t like him so we’re not going to listen to him when he asks us to call him Lord Voldemort because he doesn’t deserve our consideration. Instead we say you-know-who because he isn’t worthy of being named."

Harry glanced again at the crowd. They’d all straightened up, their shoulders proudly back and they were all nodding wisely at each other as if to say, yes this is exactly why.

On the one hand Harry was furious to see them let off from their cowardice so easily, but on the other hand it was wonderful to see a whole roomful of people feeling superior to Voldemort. Sirius was watching them all too, smiling to himself, and Harry was reminded that Sirius was perfectly capable of managing people just apparently not on his own behalf.

“Yes, I’m not calling him Voldesnort, not after he burned up our house,” Nico glowered and Harry hated to see all that adult anger imposed on a child’s chubby face.

“Nun-huh,” agreed Amy shaking her head. “But you and Mr Harry and Mr James are going to make you-know-who really sorry. Aren’t you Lord Sirius?”

“That’s right,” agreed Nico. “If anyone can it’s Lord Sirius because he’s the darkest bastard alive.”

There was a pause as the whole room froze up, then Sirius, his voice quivering with ruthlessly suppressed laughter, said,

“That’s not normally how I choose to introduce myself.”

“Nicholas Christopher! Where did you hear –” Amélie faltered to a halt as it obviously occurred to her it might be better if Sirius didn’t figure out exactly who it was Nico had overheard. It was definitely better for them if Harry didn’t figure it out, he’d enjoy showing them how terribly wrong they were.


“Actually they did,” said Sirius. “They burned down my house the spring after I left Hogwarts.”

“Did everything burn up?” Amy asked sympathetically. “Even your shoes?”

“Yes even my shoes.”

“And your breakfast?”

“Yes breakfast too.”

“And all your special things?” asked Nico in a low wobbly voice.

“Yes, all my special things too.” Hurt had snuck into Sirius’ voice.

“Did you cry?” Nico asked even quieter.

“No, I broke both my hands on a wall instead which was very silly of me. It’s much better to cry.”

“It’s not sissy?”

“Of course not. It’s much braver to admit it hurts. But all our friends were there for a party and all
of them escaped and nobody was badly hurt and if I got chose I’d have chosen that.”

“I’d chose for our house not to burn down,” said Nico.

“Well yes, I’d have chosen that too,” said Sirius, the stifled laughter was back, “but if my house had to burn down, what I wanted most was for everyone to be safe.”

“I s’pose so,” Nico admitted begrudgingly. Harry wanted to hug him for his inability to conceptualize actually losing one of his family.

“How come your house burned down if you’re the darkest –”

“Amelia Marie!”

“But Mummy,”
Sirius coughed loudly. “My reputation has been rather exaggerated.”

“You’re not dark?” asked Nico, sounding disappointed.

“Nope. Because if you’re dark you can lose all kinds of important things. Like your nose.” Sirius reached out and pretended to steal the nose off Amy’s face as she giggled. He did the same to Nico, who just huffed scornfully,

“I know you didn’t steal my nose.”

“Are you sure?” asked Sirius. He held his hand out flat and two fleshy lumps twitched on his open palm.

Nico shrieked and clapped his hand over his face then, reassured about the position of his nose, crowed with laughter at the trick.

“Ugh,” said Amy poking at one of the fake noses. It vanished in a fuzz of bright red sparkles. The second went up in gold.

“Lord Voldesnort lost his nose,” said Sirius. “He probably does snort.”

“You can’t lose your nose,” Nico folded his arms, refusing to be fooled a second time.

“You-know-who has. He looks very silly.”

“Really?”

“Really truly. Do you want to see?”

“Yeah.” Nico scrambled up onto his knees in the hopes of seeing better.

Sirius made a pulling twisting gesture with his hand and there was suddenly a small glowing image of Riddle hovering just above the table. Without the looming presence and dark fear, Harry was surprised to discover Riddle did indeed look very silly, like he’d been moulded out of plasticine by someone who didn’t understand how human faces worked.

“He’s got no nose,” squealed Amy.

“Or eyebrows,” said Nico. “Why’s he got no eyebrows? Did he forget to draw them on like Ryan’s mum when she’s too goddamn busy to do up her face?”
“Not touching that one,” Sirius muttered. “See,” he said more loudly, “that’s why you shouldn’t use dark magic, cause you might lose your nose and end up looking like a skinned slug.”

Christien and Amélie shifted so they could look at the image.

“He does seem to have a somewhat unfortunate appearance,” said Amélie.

“He’s got no nose,” said Amy as if she might have missed that.

“So I see.”

“How did he convince anyone to follow him looking like that?” asked Christien.

“He didn’t always look like that,” said Sirius, “it can take a while for dark magic to rot you from the inside out.” A second pulling twisting gesture and there was a picture of Tom Riddle just a few years older than one from the first horcrux.

“Moderately handsome,” was Amélie’s verdict. She grinned slyly, “But not even close to Lord Black.”

“Mel!” Christien grumbled.

“What? Tell me it’s not true?”

“Of course it’s true. But you’re not supposed to admire handsome lords. I’m sure it was in our marriage contract.”

“We don’t have a marriage contract because we said our vows in a frantic hurry in the Paris Catacombs to change my name so my family couldn’t track me by it.”

“And it was the most romantic wedding ever,” sighed Amy, obviously having heard the story many times.

“Yes it was,” Christien crouched down so he could wrap his arm around her shoulders. “But clearly I left something out of the vows if your mother’s off admiring other wizards.”

“But nobody’s more handsome than you, daddy,” she said as an article of faith.

“Of course nobody’s more handsome than your daddy,” agreed Amélie. “But Lord Black comes a distant second.”

Sirius collapsed back in his chair as if he’d been overcome, “I see how it is. I’m just not pretty enough to care about.”

“No, no,” Amy scrambled up to throw her arms around his neck. “You’re very pretty. Ellie’s big sister says so.”

“Oh well, if Ellie’s big sister says so, that’s okay then.”

“And Ellie’s big sister’s best friend says you’re too pretty.”

“Even better,” Sirius did laugh then. “And Harry, stop glaring at everyone, if they want to see what you-know-who looks like, they can just ask.”

Harry jumped as he hadn’t realized Sirius was aware of the curious crowd edging round to try and catch a glimpse that he had been glaring back. The crowd jumped worse, suddenly reforming into
their line. After some nervously exchanged glances, a young man stepped forward,

“Lord Black, may we please see the picture of you-know-who?”

The way he said you-know-who was different. It was the first time Harry had heard someone say it with scorn.

“Sure,” said Sirius. “Pass me a bar towel would you.”

The young man hurriedly fetched a small towel from the top of the bar. It smelt faintly of beer. Sirius shifted the image of Riddle with one hand, dropping it down on the towel. Harry snorted because now the image was fuzzy at the edges from the towelling and looked completely ridiculous.

The young man snorted too. He took the towel and raced back to show his friends. The room suddenly exploded with chatter.

Sirius turned to Christien, “I think you should stay at the Three Broomsticks until we have your house ready. The wards are decent here if I say so myself. Do you have sufficient funds, or would you like me to speak to Madam Rosmerta?”

“I believe we and Madam Rosmerta can come to an arrangement,” said Christien. “I will write to my cousin. And thank you.”

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. “You agreed to take the heartstone. Thank you for your kindness, there is no debt between us.”

“No, Amélie is right, you are foolish. I owe you more than I can ever hope to repay. If you ever need anything, if there is any assistance I can offer you, I will be there.”

“Really no,” said Sirius.

Christien sighed, “Just remember. And my apologies for, that is I am very sorry my wife and I thought –”

“Let’s not go there. The gossip in this village is insane.”

“And I should not have listened. The grapevine strangles all good sense. I –”

“Thank you,” said Sirius firmly. “Now I have to go speak to my solicitor for a moment.” And he fled.

Christien sighed. “Mel?”

“It’s alright. We will invite him to our housewarming.”

Christien looked flummoxed at the idea this was any sort of repayment. Harry was glad it wasn’t just him. He followed after Sirius, who had motioned Mr Probert aside,

“Can you get onto the goblins right away? We need a heartstone and temporary wards in place before it gets dark.”

“That’s going to be expensive.” Mr Probert warned.

“James can cover the extra fees.”
Mr Probert rubbed at his glasses again, “Would it not be appropriate to consult Mr Potter first?”

“What? That would just delay things. What difference would it make?”

Mr Probert actually smiled, “No appreciable difference I’m sure. It never has before.”

“Exactly. I still have signing authority, right?”

“You do indeed Lord Black.”

“Alright then, let’s do that. I’ll let Jay know when I catch up with him. But preliminary wards, for the whole village, as quickly as they can, or this is going to be a massacre.”

“I understand. Just let me apologize to Madam Rosmerta and I will be on my way. Once I’ve spoken to the goblins, I’ll speak to the Mayor. What would you like me to tell him when he queries the expense?”

“Tell him James will be running for Minister of Magic sooner or later and we’ll be looking for support.”

“That will reassure him. Very well young Sirius I shall start work.”

“Thanks Mr P.”

Harry tugged at Sirius’ sleeve, “How is that reassuring. Isn’t bribery bad?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s reassuring because doing things for the community if you want to run for Minister is expected. If we’re paying for wards because James wants to run for Minister that’s totally normal, the Mayor can work with that. Otherwise he’d have been worried we might have wanted, well, bad things. I have no idea how lurid the Mayor’s imagination might be so I can’t give you specifics.”

“But you can’t bribe people to become Minister.” That was wrong, Hermione had been very clear about that.

“How else would you become Minister? At least we’re using our money instead of someone else’s. Cough, Fudge, cough.”

“But you can’t elect people just cause they have money. That’s really bad.”

“Oh, and the muggle system is so much better. Their Parliament bribes them with their own money. Honestly, even Fudge would be embarrassed to try that.”

Harry really wished Hermione was there because he was certain there had to be an argument to counter that, he just couldn’t think of one at that precise moment. Fortunately, before he strained his brain, Murphy slouched towards them,

“Hey Harry.”

“Hey Murph, did you need something?”

“We were wondering if Black would let us keep the bar towel with you-know’s picture?”

“What did you want it for?” asked Sirius suspiciously.

“We have a dartboard.”
“Oh? Oh sure, absolutely, you can keep it.” Sirius collected it from a man displaying it to his wife, who was leaning forward to study it while keeping her hands firmly tucked behind her back.

“He really does have no nose,” she said.

“Yep,” said Sirius. “He smells like off fish too.”

“Yuck,” the woman jerked back like she might pick up the smell by association. Sirius flicked his hand at the towel, and the Voldemort figure suddenly had a wand to wave,

“I am Lord Voldesnort,” it squeaked. “You can’t do this to me.”

“Sure we can,” said Murphy. He took the towel and pinned it to the dartboard and took his set of darts.

_I am Lor – thunk – you can’t do – thunk – to me – thunk_

The queue abruptly removed to the dartboard.

“Have you caused enough chaos yet?” Harry asked Sirius. “Can you take a break for breakfast?”

Sirius grinned looking supremely pleased with himself. “I could probably fit breakfast in. Somebody promised me poached eggs.”

“Only the best for my very pretty badass,” Harry promised as solemnly as he could manage, before laughing and darting into the kitchen as Sirius chased after him squawking with outrage.
Sirius watched Harry crack the eggs into the boiling water,

“And you’re not using magic at all?”

“Nope.”

Sirius might not have believed him but Harry looked far too smug to be lying. “This is so unfair. You’re not even using vinegar. Lily swore by vinegar.”

“And did it work?”

“Well no, the white got lost in the water and we ended up with just yolks just the same.” Sirius looked at his poached eggs on toast, runny yolks settled in neat beds of wibbly whites, “Are you sure you’re not using magic?”

Harry laughed. “If I’d known poached eggs was all it took to impress you.”

“Everything about you impresses me. The poached eggs though, they’re freaking me out.” Sirius took another bite and he wasn’t exaggerating the eggs tasted amazing, without even the slightest taint of magic. Anytime Sirius tried to cook with magic everything had an unfortunate tendency to taste of lemon which meant the only thing he could reliably make was lemon cheesecake and lemon roast beef, which was so a thing no matter what certain stick in the muds said.

“Were you using a muggle cookery book?” asked Harry he spread butter on his toast.

“Are cookery books that different? I think they were all wizard cook books but Lily and I tried all kinds of weird muggle tricks. There were egg tea bags and metal rings and floating pods. Mostly we scalded ourselves and cursed a lot. Until Lily completed lost her temper and boiled a whole pan of vinegar but the eggs still lost their whites and neither of us could breathe right for the next couple of days.”

Harry put the butter knife down to cover his face in both hands which was just rude.

“How have you not poisoned yourself?” he asked voice muffled by his hands.

“You’re over-reacting,” Sirius grumbled. “We only did that the once. Twice. How are we defining poisoned again?”

Harry lifted his head out of his hands and looked at him. “Imagine I’m swearing at you a lot right now.”

“You should have heard James when he discovered the mess the concentrated vinegar had made of
the saucepan. It didn’t matter how much we told him we weren’t going to eat the vinegar we were just cooking the eggs in it, he said no more trying to cook poached eggs ever. He was very loud.”

Harry’s face scrunched up, “I want to defend your right to try and make poached eggs if you choose to, but honestly I’m with James.”

“Traitor.”

Harry looked at his exasperating boyfriend. Sirius was smiling fondly at what he appeared to consider their unnecessary fretting.

“So, so with James on this,” he said fervently, hiding behind his hands again. He was honestly surprised Sirius had survived long enough for Harry to find him. It was infuriating. He glared some more,

“You nearly dissolved your lungs, and did dissolve the saucepan coating. Very loud was the least you deserved. Didn’t you think to ask somebody?”

“And force Lils to put up with being patronized as an incompetent muggle-born? Fuck no. It would have been different if James’ mum was still alive, but as it stood, no chance. We’d have blown up the kitchen first. James quite agreed with that part, he didn’t care if we blew up the kitchen, he just didn’t want us to blow ourselves up too.”

“You have no idea how much it worries me that James is apparently the sensible one.”

“You both fuss too much.”

“If you drove James to the point of specifying blowing up the kitchen was fine, but yourselves was not, then clearly there wasn’t enough fussing going on. There should have been so much more fussing. Much, much more fussing.” Hopefully Sirius would let Harry fuss at him for the rest of their lives. That sounded delightful.

“You have no sense of adventure,” said Sirius cheerfully. He took another bite of his eggs. “These are amazing though.”

“Good,” said Harry. “If you want poached eggs, I’ll make them for you. Please do not cook anything if blowing up the kitchen is one of the better options.”

“We never blew up all of the kitchen.”

“Somehow that’s not as reassuring as you no doubt intended it to be.” Harry carefully scooped his eggs out the water, patted them dry with a clean tea towel (did wizards have something against paper towels?) and flipped them onto his toast.

“Well the less said about our experiments with a muggle pressure cooker the better.”

“Oh god.” Harry sat himself down at the table so he could look across at Sirius and remind himself that since he was right there his boyfriend had obviously had not blown himself up too badly.

“But they weren’t actual explosions, it just sprayed stew everywhere. Even the ceiling. Rather impressive when you get down to it. The only thing that exploded was the chutney, although really it was the fridge that exploded, blew clear across the kitchen with the most horrendous bang. And even that wouldn’t have been so bad except we thought it was the death eaters attacking, so, well, I
guess we did blow up all of the kitchen – but not because of cooking.”

Harry opened his mouth a couple of times but no appropriate words came to mind.

“You look astonishingly like James right now.”

Then Harry couldn’t say anything for a completely different reason.

“How’d I end up with two such total worry-warts?” said Sirius mournfully.

“Perhaps because you give us a lot to worry about?”

“Nah,” Sirius grinned at him. “That can’t be it.”

Harry had a strong desire to flick egg at him and compromised by kicking him under the table.

“So why wasn’t James cooking?” he asked. “He’d have to be putting in a lot of effort to be worse at it.”

“Oh no, James is far too good at potions to be bad at cooking. That’s the problem.”

“Huh?”

“Well, let’s see if I can explain this properly, potions aren’t really my thing either way. So, potions are like charms, they’re a way of allowing less powerful wizards to concentrate their magic so they can have an effect greater than they’d normally manage. Also they allow powerful wizards to concentrate their magic in truly magical ways. Alchemy is a sub-branch of potions after all.”

“With you so far.”

“So most potions it’s critical to follow the steps, to build the magic in the correct way. Like baking a sponge cake, you mess around with the ingredients and what you end up with is not sponge cake.”

“I’ve found enough icing fixes most issues.”

“So like James,” Sirius shook his head at himself. “Did anybody cover potions with you? Because I imagine you’ll be brilliant at them.”

Harry laughed out loud at the idea of him being good at potions, “No way. Snape –”

“Stop,” said Sirius. “Snape is admittedly very good at potions but he’s one of those teachers who’s so good at their subject they’re terrible at teaching it. And in fairness to him, James is even worse when it comes to potions. Don’t worry, I have the perfect tutor in mind for you.”

“Oh,” Harry started, because the sole advantage of everything falling apart was that it had meant no more potions ever.

“Do you not want to learn potions?” asked Sirius, not in least critically, he mostly sounded confused, as if the idea of not wanting to learn something was beyond him.

Harry sighed, “I’ll give it a go. Until your tutor gives up on me in disgust.”

“Harry love, I’d never lumber you with a tutor like that. This is the nicest person I know.”

Harry felt sorry for them already. “So potions –”
“Right potions. Generally the steps are important, particularly if you don’t have the power and skill to just push through to the end result. But if you do have that power and skill –”

“Like James?”

“Right, like James. His family magic is saturated with potions ability, and his dad taught him potions from when he was tiny. Potions are one of few branches of magic you can teach children effectively because of the way it allows you to build up power. Young children can actually produce simple potions, but at the same time are unlikely to do any damage the way out of control charms tend to. In fact it’s better to teach the basic steps when you haven’t much magic to speak of or you tend to brush past them which is fine if you’re making easy stuff but disastrous for anything technical.”

Sirius smiled suddenly, “James had a little work bench in his dad’s lab about so high,” he held his hand a foot off the ground. “There’s a picture of him somewhere, standing there with a little mortar and pestle earnestly grinding away. I think it was when James’ mum showed her that picture that Lily decided to marry him.”

Harry had a sudden image of himself as a child standing at child-sized work bench with his dad crouched beside him showing him how to dice ingredients and the loss of everything he could have had was abruptly so all-encompassing that he wanted to wail out his grief.

Taking a large bite of egg on toast, he chewed industriously without tasting it.

“When you’re good at potions you don’t need to follow the recipe exactly for the simple ones, sometimes it’s actually better if you don’t.”

Harry swallowed his toast and the lump in his throat. “Like cooking, sometimes you need a bit of extra something just because.”

“Exactly. I knew you were one of those annoying cooks who when asked for a recipe says things like a slosh of cream, and a handful of peppercorns, or add milk until it looks right.”

“Nobody’s ever asked me for a recipe before.” Harry ran through the recipes he knew, he had mostly stopped bothering with actual measurements, and a lot of them came with qualifiers depending on who he was cooking for, and, “Yeah okay, I might say something like that.”

“Knew it. James is just like that with potions. He was never interested enough to progress to the advanced stuff where he’d need to be precise. So all his potion instructions are a handful frogspawn, that’s way more than a handful, scoop some of it back out, and, three pinches of asphodel powder, no add a bit more it’s not smooshy enough yet, until you want to smack him.”

“Poor Sirius.”

“I know. James can make something simple like pepper-up by tipping four random ingredients – I mean, he says they’re not random but he just trails a finger along the options and grabs four different things each time so it seems plenty random to me – adding half a pint of… No wait let me get this right, adding, about that much, no a little more, Padfoot I said a little, here quick add some more of that to even things out of honeywater and boiling it until it obligingly turns purple for him. If I tried that my cauldron exploding would be the least of it.”

“But it works?”

“For James. And only up to a point. He wouldn’t be able to sell them commercially for example because they’re not reproducible and there’s no consistency of ingredients for things like allergies.
Also they tend to work better if he’s making them for a person, and that person is the one who drinks it. If he brewed a pepper-up for you and I drank it, it wouldn’t work nearly as well.”

Harry nodded, “Liked I halved the curry powder in anything I cooked for my Aunt and Uncle?”

“Yes. For most people the heavy lifting is in the potion, not their magic. But for James it’s mostly working because of his magic, he’s just using the potion to enhance that. It’s not all brute force though, James knows his ingredients and recipes backwards so he’s making a lot of substitutions and corrections on the fly.”

“Honestly it sounds like he should be brilliant at cooking,” said Harry, trying not to be grumpy because he liked having something that was all his. “Not chef-cooking I guess because that’s all about set ingredients and reproducibility, but general cooking.”

“You would think, but James learned potions before he ever learned to cook. Well we all did but the effects are most obvious in James.”

“So?”

“So the whole point of potions is you put your magic into them. From chopping the ingredients to stirring them into the cauldron, your magic flows into the whole process. And when you’ve been doing that since you were three and could bang blocks together, it’s very, very hard to stop doing it.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“So James can brew a potion without thinking too much about it, but unless he concentrates hard the whole time he’s cooking, he can’t cook without letting his magic flow into the meal.”

“And that’s bad?”

“Well it wouldn’t be if James wasn’t bloody brimful of magic. Fortunately he likes us, so usually it was pretty cool – eating breakfast came with the same jolt as two shots of coffee, dinner left you lightly toasted as if you’d drunk half a bottle of wine. And he was a good cook. Of course if you had actual coffee or wine with food that James cooked it could all get messy. It used to happen sometimes if a few of the Order stayed over and we forgot to warn them. Our house got a bit of a reputation but we don’t think anyone figured it out. One time when we were all exhausted after a raid, Dorcas nagged James into making brownies even though we told her it was a bad idea. The whole lot of us woke up in a heap two days later. It was probably the most relaxing time we had the whole of the first go round. The rest of them got a bit wary after that.”

“I’m not surprised. I am surprised you kept eating the random magical effect food.” Harry thought about that for a second. “Wait, no I’m not. It sounds exactly like something you would do. So tell me, if two days enforced sleep didn’t manage it, what on earth happened to make you stop?”

“We weren’t too concerned, cause James would never hurt us, but we didn’t really factor in how twitchy he could get. Sometimes eating something he’d cooked was like swallowing a condensed cheering charm and we spent all evening grinning at each other with demented amiability. And it could get really bad if he was worried about something. Back when the death eater attacks were ramping up the first go round, after he made breakfast one time Lily found she couldn’t leave the house.”

“Ohh, not good.” Harry couldn’t imagine anyone would react well to that.

“Somewhere between terrible and hilarious. Lily and James were walking together, James kept on
going, and Lily stopped in the doorway. She demanded to know why she couldn’t leave the house, and James didn’t understand what the problem, or even know there was a problem, so he suggested she could stay home if she liked and he’d call her in sick. Lily objected, and I didn’t follow the rest but you can imagine things went downhill fast as Lily got madder and James got more confused.

“I didn’t understand either, so I was going to sneak off and leave them to it, but Lily grabbed my arm and dragged me back and told James she was going to have me tear him to shreds for her. Which, they never dragged me into their fights – but Lily was almost crying so James flapped his hands at me and said he was going to buy a paper.

“Lily calmed down once he’d left and I managed to understand what was happening even if I couldn’t believe it. That James would do that – You know if actually had bound Lily to the house, I think I really might have torn him to shreds for her – But then we remembered that James had been cursing over the Daily Prophet while he was cooking and everything made sense again.” The tension that had built in Sirius’ shoulders relaxed abruptly.

“For a certain value of sense,” added Harry.

“Oh shush you.” Sirius kicked him under the table. “Everything made sense again. We knew James’ tendency could produce complicated results if he was wound up enough. After we lost a bet he made cakes for the Auror division, and he must have been resenting the hell out of cooking for death eaters because, although we can’t be certain, as far as we can tell every single death eater and sympathizer came down with violent stomach aches. The rest of us just had great cupcakes.”

“Oooh.” That was impressive. Harry wanted lessons in that.

Sirius laughed, “So it takes mayhem and chaos to send you all starry-eyed. I’m going to have to up my game.”

“Poisons are annoyingly indiscriminate.”

“They also won’t work on most purebloods. None of the standard stuff anyway. You need something esoteric, there are a couple of rare editions in the Black Library that would do. One is rare because Bellidora Black only authorised ten copies be produced and gave them out to female friends and family. She was said to have spelled the books so no man could read them but whatever criteria she used didn’t apply to deviants like me – that book used to leap out the library shelf at me – so you should be able to read it. The criteria did apply to my mother though, which I try not to think about too closely. The other book is rare because once Cepheus Black realized how useful it could be he had all the other copies he could find burned, along with the author. But if you will write books on rare poisons, and are stupid enough to let people know you did, you have to accept the consequences.”

“I promise not let anyone know if I write a book about rare poisons.”

“Good. And don’t use a standard poison. It won’t work, and a failed poisoning just provokes people. If we’re going to provoke people we can do it better.” Sirius paused and then smacked himself on the head, “Sorry, that’s the family line. I don’t know why I’m repeating it to you. Obviously you’re not going to poison anybody.”

“Obviously,” Harry agreed because poisons were annoyingly indiscriminate.

“And you are clearly a natural born provoker of people,” Sirius shot him an admiring glance “You don’t need any lessons in that.”
“My one true talent.”

“And you’re very, very good at it.” Sirius picked up his hand and kissed it. Harry grinned because it was nice to be appreciated. Sirius kept hold of his hand as he continued,

“We blamed the dodgy cupcakes on poison. Started a rumour that you-know-who served poisoned wine at their last shindig and people believed it, which was hilarious. I wanted to do it again on purpose but James said even death eaters weren’t so stupid they wouldn’t catch on eventually and Lily wanted to save the idea for a society reception which I had to admit was a better plan so we shelved it for later.”

“And did you get around to that?”

Sirius shrugged his shoulders, “After a while we lost enthusiasm for the idea. More and more people were dying. Giving a few society darlings the runs didn’t seem enough.”

“So what did you do?”

“In our defence, it had been a long couple of years. We’d have probably been even more angry if we weren’t so exhausted. And James would probably have had more sense except they’d been an attack in Carkitt Market and one of the dead was a little boy just a bit older than– So none of us were in the best frame of mind.”

Harry put down his fork so he could concentrate because Sirius had never prevaricated before,

“What did you do?”

“The Notts were hosting the Yule Ball. So, we – James, Lily and me – uh, we dressed up in dark robes and masks and burned the place down.”

Sirius had spoken very quickly and the last few words mushed together so it took Harry a moment to understand.

“You burned their house down?” he checked. That was awesome.

“Mansion. It was this huge mansion out in Hertfordshire. Probably wrong to destroy all that history. But it was so dark you could blister your fingers on the walls. So not a great loss? Maybe. We did manage not to kill anyone, thank Merlin. We had enough the sense to try and avoid that and hit the East Wing first. Which was falling down behind the frontage and not used by the family. So everyone had time to run out the ballroom and kitchens in the West Wing.”

“But how? Wasn’t it difficult? Didn’t they have wards and things?”

“If you spend the week before hand taking them down, no not really. The East Wing was abandoned and that’s always a weakness if you’re using family wards. Also, as it turns out, wizards tend not to ward against muggle petrol bombs.”

“Morons.”

“Exactly.”

“So you burned down their mansion and blamed it on the death eaters.”

“Yep. And you-know-who refused to admit he wasn’t omnipotent, so he claimed he had organized the raid. Because the Notts weren’t devoted enough to him. The Notts refused to admit they were following a homicidal maniac, so they decided it was the fault of the Yaxleys and started to
backstab them. And nobody figured it out, thank you Merlin.”

Harry grinned. “That’s amazing.” He watched as Sirius twisted uneasily. “Why are you acting like it was a bad thing?”

“I don’t know. I guess I feel bad for not feeling bad. It was illegal as hell and we were Aurors. Burning down a family mansion, that’s almost sacrilege. I can tell how bad it is because I’d be so thrilled if someone burned down Grimmauld Place – that’s my family’s house in London, they lost the country estate back in the nineteenth century – and I know how much of a traitor I am.”

“You are not a traitor.”

Sirius laughed. “It’s alright, I know what I am.”

Harry ground his teeth. That was a long term argument though and Harry knew all about how to fight long term. He refocused on a short term objective,

“Why don’t you burn down Grimmauld Place?”

“You think the purebreds hate me now? If I burned down the family mansion they’d have me hung for apostasy. I can’t put James to any more trouble with things as they are. Maybe later I can get rid of that slag heap of dark magic. Honestly calling it dark magic is giving it airs, it’s too small and grasping for that. It’s a decayed mess of shabby mean magic.”

“Do you want me to burn it down?”

“Oh Harry, that’s a lovely thought. Thank you.” Sirius squeezed his hand. “It wouldn’t go any better though. Maybe after we’re rid of you-know-who.”

“It’s a date,” said Harry, and could feel himself blush because they hadn’t used the word date before.

“A date it is.” Sirius blushed back at him.

“And congratulations on burning down the Nott mansion.” Thinking about it the Nott mansion was one of those that got eaten by Neville’s tangleroots. Burning it don probably worked out better for them. “If they want to support dark lords, they should realize there are consequences.”

“It did feel good.” Sirius smiled a little. “Too good really. So we figured we better not do it again. But it did feel good.” He refocused abruptly, “And you absolutely cannot tell anyone. They’d destroy James if they knew.”

“And not you?”

“Well obviously they’d get me too, but they’re going to get me sooner or later whatever I do. All I want is to not take Jay down with me.”

“They are not going to get you.”

Sirius smiled at him with gently sad resignation.

Harry had no patience with resignation, “What does James think of that?”

“James doesn’t understand. He thinks logic and fairness will prevail eventually. His father made his money in potions manufactory.”
“Is that bad?” Harry asked. Sirius was saying it as if it was bad.

“Pure-blooded wizards do not concern themselves with such things,” Sirius had straightened his chair shifting his shoulders slightly. Harry was extremely disconcerted to realize he was imitating Lucius Malfoy and had to blink a couple of times to be sure Sirius’ hair hadn’t gone blond.

“Wizards might possibly deign to create a deathly new potion, or even a healing potion of sufficiently abstruse value, but they do not make money from hair tonic. Even if it is a tonic one uses on one’s hair all the time.” Sirius fluttered at his hair and pulled a face, cracking the Malfoy illusion.

“I don’t see why that means James doesn’t understand?” Harry grumped.

“Because I can tell you that they think like that, and you and James can understand they think like that, but you still don’t get it. Not really. The ability to think that you are intrinsically superior to everyone else because of your blood. You and James are too nice to understand that.”

“Neither James nor I are nice.”

Sirius laughed at him.

“We’re not.”

“Neither you or James would ever change your opinion of somebody because it turned out their parents weren’t pure-blooded.”

“That’s not nice, that’s just practical.”

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Lily got it. She wrinkled her nose and said just like Vernon – Vernon was her sister’s boyfriend, husband now – and bought a bunch of historical novels for research. And I lent her three Black etiquette manuals – very useful if you need to know how to insult someone by admiring their dress – which James was annoyed about. He was all twitchy that she might decide it was too much trouble and she’d want to go back to the muggle world, and he couldn’t do that while his mum and dad were alive because it would break their hearts. But Lily lost her patience when one of the etiquette books rapped her on the knuckles a third time for slouching and tried throwing the books at my head. Which, given they were Black books obviously didn’t work. I held out my hands and they all landed there in a neat pile and Lily said I was most aggravating person she had ever met.” Sirius beamed with pride.

“So she gave up on the pureblood etiquette?”

“She asked me if there was anything she could do that would make them forget the fact she was muggle-born. And I told her if she was really good and pretty behaved then in a hundred years or so they might decide that actually she must be descended from purebred lines that went squib.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair.” Harry twitched his shoulders uncomfortably.

“Disgustingly, in their minds, that would be the greatest compliment they could pay.”

“I want to go punch them all on the nose.”

Sirius cautiously peeked at him side-on, “Second date?”

“Second date it is.”

Sirius ducked his head smiling, after a moment he continued, “So Lily was about as enthusiastic as
you over the whole idea –"

“I don’t blame her.”

“Oh me neither. So Lily looked at James, and asked Jim did you really want me to do all that? And James said, of course I bloody don’t, if I wanted a pureblood wife that badly, I’d just go marry a pureblood. Because James is the soul of romance.”

“Obviously.”

“And I said he should hang on and pick up an heiress wife given you-know-who was doing his best to decimate the old families, but if he was too impatient to wait there were lots of choices and James said – don’t you start, I’ve already had Priscilla Macmillan suggesting I marry her because she’d quite understand if I wanted to keep my m-word as a mistress and in fact she preferred that because it meant I’d bother her less. Which was possibly something he should have mentioned to Lily before, because she went as red as her hair and I fled the room because there was clearly shouting and mushiness to be done.”

“Mushiness?”

“So much mushiness.” Under the table Sirius knocked his feet against Harry’s. “It’s all very traumatizing.”

“Poor, poor Sirius. Of course you would never do such a thing.” Harry tangled his and Sirius’ ankles together.

“Absolutely not.” Sirius slid down his seat so he could slide his shin along the line of Harry’s. “Perish the thought. No mushiness here.”

Harry watched Sirius smiling back at him so light and happy, and wanted nothing more in the world than to say, I love you so much. But his throat closed up around the words choking him until he swallowed them down like jagged edged stones.

With an effort he dragged his thoughts back to their conversation,

“So James locked Lily in the house.”

“Unintentionally,” Sirius corrected quickly. “Once he had five minutes to think about it, James figured out what had happened too. He came shuffling back in all apologetic and awkward. James is too big to look like that, I hate it. He asked Lily if she could forgive him. And she folded her arms and said first she was waiting to see if I could leave the house. Which was when I discovered I was stuck too because James is an equal opportunities over-protective bastard.”

Harry snorted.

“Yeah, you can laugh. Lily did. And James looked even sorrier. But we told him not to be an idiot. It was an accident. It wasn’t like we didn’t know his cooking was unpredictable. Of course James apologized like crazy and he’d have fixed it if he could but wild magic like that isn’t really fixable. Or well it is, but it’s risky and therefore, if the effects are reasonably benign, you should just leave it to wear off. So we were stuck indoors for three days and couldn’t get to Diagon Alley for a week.”

“And were you still talking to each other after those three days?”

“More or less, though tempers were definitely getting a bit raggedy by the end of the third day. We
spent most of the time taking the roof and side walls off the back bedroom because James felt horribly guilty and I can’t take being trapped.” Sirius stopped and took a deep breath, “I really can’t alley cat. I’m not claustrophobic but being stuck,” Sirius breathing had begun to pick up. “Being trapped inside. Reminds me of those summers imprisoned in Grimmauld Place. My mother. It’s like the walls are clawing at me.”

And Harry thought about his godfather trapped in Grimmauld Place. He shoved his chair back and crashed around the table to reach Sirius. Harry grabbed him close before it struck him Sirius might find a close hold too confining, but Sirius turned into the embrace and clutched back.

“I can’t do it. I’m sorry.” Sirius mumbled into his shoulder. “It’s, I can feel everything slipping away. The walls. There’s no air. Can’t,” Sirius stopped talking, stopped even breathing for a moment, then Harry felt his body heave as he took a long slow breath, then one more.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry, although he wasn’t really speaking to Sirius, he was speaking to his godfather who’d escaped Azkaban only to spend his last year being imprisoned by his friends, and Harry had been too young and stupid to notice.

Sirius hiccupped a couple of times, then managed to lift his head, “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“So not true.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. I’m sorry for being an idiot. But thinking about being stuck in that house.” Sirius shuddered all over like a dog shaking off water. “Anyway like I said, James and Lily took the roof off their back bedroom and then took down the two side walls to open it to the outside when I couldn’t stop having idiotic panic attacks because I thought the walls were eating me. Melodrama, just can’t get away from it.”

Harry scowled as Sirius mocked himself and wrapped around him tighter.

“Still they said since I broke it I had to keep it, and it was my room from then on. Lily grew a sheet of rock crystal over half the room as a replacement for the roof, and James put in some environment charms to keep the rain out. I wouldn’t have minded because Padfoot is fine any weather but Lily said I was nightmare when I was sick so shut up and put up. I never get sick as Padfoot but she was insistent, so I shut up and put up because, oh, it was the loveliest ever room.

Harry’s brows lowered in consideration, he wasn’t sure how he could build Sirius a house with no walls.

“There was always the hint of a breeze, and you could breathe in fresh air. And at night you could see the stars.”

Breeze and stars, thought Harry, that he could do that. “It sounds great.” Bit of a nightmare defensively but that could be worked around.

“It was wonderful.”

“It sounds like you’d have preferred to be sleeping outside?”

“Oh I loved sleeping outside. But after a death eater shattered my hip and it took three weeks to fix everything up, I started to appreciate a mattress. Back at Hogwarts I used to sleep outside as often as I could, trying to store up the air for when I had to go back to my family. I did the same thing whenever I stayed with James, but his dad noticed and he had a grave, concerned conversation with James about sneaking out and dubious potions, dodgy clubs and underage sexual experimentation
— and James denied everything because we were only just working out how to manage fire whiskey. So his dad waited up and caught me, and I swear I was never so terrified in my life because he could have taken James away.”

“He could have tried,” said Harry, because he had more faith in James than that.

Sirius laughed, “That’s what James said,” and wriggled until he could kiss Harry. “The whole thing was a ridiculous mess. I think I terrified James’ poor dad almost as much as he terrified me. My stupid lungs decided it was a perfect time to seize up and stop working. I was trying to apologize, beg, I have no idea really because I couldn’t think past the horror, and everything started going black. The last thing I remember is him yelling for James and Euphemia and grabbing me before I fell over.”

“But it worked out okay?”

“Oh yes. If I’d had a moment to think, I probably wouldn’t have been frightened at all because James’ parents were ridiculously kind. When my brain was working again we were outside and it took me a moment to recognize the garden because we were in a brand new pergola that James’ dad was constructing from what had been fence posts while James’ mum was spelling wisteria to grow up and over the canopy. And James was calling me an idiot, so I knew everything was going to be alright. Later, they gave me a heap of blankets and let me sleep out there as much as I liked.”

“Good.”

“Don’t look so solemn, alley cat. I’m lots better than I was, promise. I hardly ever freak out any more, honest.” Sirius peeked at him hopefully.

“Are you honestly acting as if I might get mad if you get upset.”

“No-o,” said Sirius unconvincingly.

“Because I might find that insulting.”

“Sorry, it’s just, I know I’m a lot of hard work.”

Harry laughed, “Don’t be silly.”

“James’ mum and dad had to rebuild their entire garden.”

“So. I bet they didn’t think it was hard work.”

Sirius looked at him for a long moment, “You mean that don’t you. I never thought I’d find anybody as crazy as the Potters.”

“Um,” Harry pulled away so he could rub his hand over his nose and hide his face. “Uh. So that locking in you in the house, that was when you stopped letting James cook?”

“Oh no, that’s just an example, what stopped James cooking was the time he broke my fingers.”

“He broke your fingers!” Harry wasn’t ready for the whiplash as he slammed into furious so fast he nearly fell over. “How many fingers did he break?”

“Why do you – Harry, no, you can’t go break James’ fingers.”

“I’m not going to break his fingers.” Harry was going to cut them off. How dare James, out of everyone, hurt Sirius. “How many?”
“Calm down, it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

“You didn’t have broken fingers?”

“Well yes they were broken. It was the most amazing crack –”

There was a snapping sound as the dishes stacked up on the drainer cracked in half.

“– rather like that in fact,” said Sirius. “Calm down you crazy person. I’ve broken my own hands enough times.

The pinging sound as glasses shattered in a shower of shards was really rather musical.

“Not comforting,” Harry snarled.

“Oh Harry love,” Sirius dragged him into an awkward hug, all arms and elbows as Harry pulled back against the affection. But Sirius kept hanging on and Harry wanted to ease himself into huggable but even as he tried to force himself he grew more ungainly and resistant. Finally Sirius sighed and let him go and Harry wanted to smack himself, why couldn’t he just do one thing right.

He tugged at his sweater sleeves and tried not to look as miserable as he felt.

“Cat,” Sirius accused, holding out one hand and gently cupping it around Harry’s jaw. “My alley cat.”

Harry leaned into the contact, already feeling his contradictory body calming under the touch.

“Better, huh?”

Harry nodded.

“Good. I’m sorry for upsetting you.”

“I’m not upset.”

“Uh-huh. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“No,” Harry snapped, before managing to moderate into, “I like hearing your stories. But it makes me angry that you were hurt.”

“I’ll leave them out.” Sirius’ face got a disturbing thoughtful cast as if he was rifling through all his stories and discarding all the ones where he ended up hurt. Harry had a horrible feeling it was most of them.

“No,” he said again. “I want to hear those stories too. But I can’t be blasé about you being hurt, I’m sorry.”

“Oh Harry, it’s okay. It’s a little weird but kinda nice that you’re concerned. But it’s all in the past, you can’t do anything about it.”

Harry clutched for his temper because, one, it was not all in the past but he would be addressing that once Riddle was a greasy smear of fading magic, and two, “You’ve just told me time travel is a thing.”

“You can waste your life fixing everything that went wrong for me.”
“It wouldn’t be a waste.”

Sirius laughed, “You’re plotting face is adorable. And I don’t want you off fixing stupid stuff. I want you here, with me.”

“Umph.”

“So I’d leave the subject alone but I can’t let you keep thinking James broke my fingers on purpose. I mean he did, but it wasn’t his fault.”

Harry decided he probably did need to know otherwise he’d definitely punch James when he saw him next. And he was starting to like James, who seemed to have a proper appreciation for Sirius unlike the rest of the wizarding world. He nodded.

“And you’ll listen to the whole explanation before running off to thump James?”

“If I must.” A hopeful thought struck Harry, “Is there someone else I could run off and thump instead?”

“Only my mother. And she’s dead.”

Harry struggled desperately not to say anything.

“It’s okay,” Sirius caught his hand and kissed the tips of Harry’s fingers. “You don’t have to try and pretend she wasn’t a god-awful harridan.”

Still Harry thought it was better to leave the subject of Sirius’ mother until he could be a little more temperate about the woman, maybe in fifty years or so. “What happened?”

“So when James broke my fingers, they were already broken and had healed up crooked. My mother, she broke them,” Sirius rubbed his left hand protectively over his right. “It was right before I ran away, otherwise she’d have healed them because she’d never allow me to be appear less than perfect. But I ran away and by the time I got to the Potter’s it was too late for the bones to be reset without breaking them again. I was in a bit of the state, so James’ mum and dad decided that could wait. I think they were worried I was going to vanish on them. They took it in turns sleeping out in the pergola with me, which was —” Sirius, unable to find words, broke off and flapped his hands.

“I’m glad.”

“And isn’t really relevant to my point, which is that by the time they brought up getting my hand fixed, I’d had the time to make it a thing.”

“A thing.”

“A thing. I decided those broken fingers were the last thing my mother would ever give me. And I was a horribly dramatic sixteen year old – I can see you pulling faces. Don’t laugh. At sixteen I was actually, somehow, even more dramatic –”

Harry wasn’t feeling like laughing at all.

“So as a horribly dramatic sixteen year old, I declared I would keep my mother’s last gift to me and refused to get my hand healed. James tried to argue you me into it, but I lost my temper. Or not really lost, it was like this incandescent fury took me over. All that summer it was like fiendfyre was burning beneath my skin and it would come roaring out ready to turn everything to ashes. I was so angry with James, and his parents, and I don’t why because they were always lovely but
that summer they were positively saintly. I didn’t know why back then either, I was just angry all
the time. I have no idea how they put up with me."

Sirius shoved away from the table and stalked across the floor in his agitation, hands twisting,
fingers fluttering like flames.

“So anger took over and I could hear myself accusing him of being like my mother and only
wanting me around if I was perfect – which was so unfair and untrue I have no idea how I managed
to say the words.”

He stopped and all the restless energy abandoned him leaving him slumped in place.

“Sometimes James was so kind to me, it just made me furious. My head is very stupid on
occasion.”

Harry wrapped his arm around Sirius waist and Sirius leaned his head against his shoulder as if it
was too heavy to hold up.

“I said sorry, of course. I’d have grovelled. But James just told me not to keep being a moron. I
succeeded in keeping hold of my temper but I was still angry, why should James be so nice to
me when my –” he pressed his face into Harry’s shoulder. “Anyway I succeeded in not yelling, and
it was all forgotten about because James is too nice, and he never said anything about my hand
again. But I could tell it bothered him, he used to look at it and wince. It did look grotesque. My
little, ring, and main fingers were all splayed at hideous angles.”

Harry pressed his lips to each of the fingers in question.

“It made people uncomfortable to see them, and because I was a twisted little shit I enjoyed
shoving it under people’s noses. Not James or his parents of course, but the professors at school,
they all stumbled over themselves and offered extensions on essays, and help with practical work
like three broken fingers were an actual problem; and when my grandfather came round, his lecture
was constantly derailed because his eyes kept skipping away to focus on my hand.”

“People can be strange,” Harry agreed.

“Once we finally left Hogwarts I slowly stopped being such melodramatic little sod about the
whole thing. Later on everyone assumed it was an injury from Auror training, and then from
fighting death eaters. I never bothered correcting anyone and I learned how to curl my hand in so it
wasn’t the first thing anyone noticed. I would have gotten it fixed but I’d made such a thing of it
staying broken I didn’t know how. If James had asked again I’d have agreed in a heartbeat but he
never said anything. Which was fair enough after the way I yelled at him. My head is so very
stupid sometimes.”

“Your head is fine, it’s the world that’s stupid.”

“That’s a nice thought.” Sirius lifted his head a little but didn’t sound very believing. “Lily never
mentioned my hand either, although I’m sure they talked about it. Every now and then I’d catch
one of them looking at my fingers. Most people, they looked gleefully horror-struck, or desperately
curious, but James and Lily, they always looked sad. Really it’s a miracle James lasted as long as
he did.”

“So one day he up and decided to fix your fingers for you?”

“His magic did,” Sirius corrected. “James might have wanted to but he wouldn’t have intentionally
done it, anymore than he’d have intentionally locked me and Lily in the house to try and keep us
safe. He was utterly horrified. Which wasn’t fair, I was the idiot who wouldn’t get my fingers
fixed. It didn’t matter how much I told him it was better, he still felt guilty. And he hasn’t cooked
anything since. Now he even pretends he can’t cook which is silly but somehow people believe it.”

“Right, but perhaps it’s best not to risk it.” Even if James was clearly way more even-tempered
than Harry, he must still have bad days. Harry didn’t want to imagine what his magic might come
up with if left unsupervised on one of his grumpy days (The thunderstorms were bad enough,
thankfully Hermione figured out he was the one causing them and Harry was able to wrap his
magic more tightly inside himself.)

“James liked cooking. I hate that he had to stop because of my stupidity.”

Personally Harry felt James had stopped because he’d realized how wrong it could go but that was
irrelevant given Sirius’ unhappiness. “We’ll put it on our list.”

“Huh?”

“After destroying Riddle, find some way for James to cook.”

“I don’t think those two things can be considered in the same league at all.”

“They’re both important to you.”

“Yes well, destroying Voldemort is the critical one.”

“That’s why it’s at the top of the list.” Why was Sirius being difficult? Harry decided not to
mention that top of *his* list was, find a safe house for Sirius. He remembered what it was like after
Riddle was destroyed in that other universe. The whole word went crazy. Harry wasn’t going to let
that happen in his universe without having a secure base for Sirius. One that wasn’t Grimmauld
Place. Burning down that house of horrors was next on the list. “Then we fix cooking for James.”

“I love your confidence,” said Sirius without any conviction behind it.

“It’s not confidence, it’s sheer bloody-mindedness.”

Sirius looked at him for a moment, then nodded in acceptance. “Okay, I can do sheer bloody-
mindedness.”

“It’s one of the things I like about you.” As soon as he said those words Harry cursed himself. How
hard would it have been to say ‘love’? It was just a word. An accurate description of his feelings.
He was not allergic to the word no matter how his throat closed up.

“I feel I should warn James.” Sirius grinned at him and Harry’s regrets dropped away because how
could he regret anything when Sirius was smiling at him, grey eyes alight.

“Nah,” said Harry. “It’s more fun if it’s a surprise.”

“True enough. So it’s defeat you-know-who, fix James, run off to Greece.”

Harry loved that Sirius had remembered Greece. He nodded eagerly.

“So it’s not just chaos and mayhem that put stars in your eyes.” Sirius kissed him long and
lingeringly, then pulled away and shook himself all over. “Alright then, time to get on with number
one on the list.”

*House for Sirius*, thought Harry, *breezes and starlight.*
Outside the kitchen things seemed to have settled down. Rosmerta was seating at a table in front of a much smaller queue of people. She was talking notes and booking people appointments to discuss their business with Sirius’ solicitor. There was still an excited crowd around the dart board and a regular thunk-thunk of darts hitting a squeaky Lord Voldesnort.

“Lord Sirius, Lord Sirius,” Amy ran smack into Sirius’ knees and he quickly reached down to steady her. “Lord Sirius, I’m going to have my own room.”

“Really? How great is that.”

“Super-great,” she cheered.

Her parents shuffled their feet self-consciously.

“Sorry,” said Christien, ducking his head. “We shouldn’t be planning on extra rooms.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Sirius. “There’s no point going to the effort of setting up a heartstone and then having you move for more space.”

“Say thank you to Lord Black for your new room,” prompted Amélie.

“Thank you Lord Sirius,” Amy pirouetted in place while waving both arms in an attempt to fully express her gratitude.

Nico, very much on his dignity, gave a small solemn bow, “Thank you Lord Sirius.”

Sirius bowed back in full extravagant arm-sweeping style. Nico watched closely and Harry could see him thoughtfully twisting his own arm and figured he would be imitating it soon.

“Now we should be going and leave Lord Black in peace.”

“Can I go and see Stevie?” asked Nico

“Stevie will have jobs to do sweetheart, maybe later.”

“But –”

“Unless you want to help Stevie with his jobs?”


“We’ll have to find you something to do. I need to speak to so many people, and your dad has to
work.” Amélie looked frazzled already.

“I expect Madam Rosmerta could do with some help in her garden,” said Sirius. “Rosie?”

Madam Rosmerta looked up, her head turned to the two bouncing children, then to the stressed out Amélie.

“Oh yes definitely,” she said. “There’s, uh, the hedges need trimming. I can get Carson do that, but somebody will need to pick up all the trimmed off parts and put the leaves to composting, and the twigs for kindling.”

“Aww,” sulked Nico, who’d obviously thought the one upside of the destruction of his parent’s shop was a temporary reprieve from being required to help.

“Nicholas Christopher, you will help out as much as you can, young man.”

“Don’t look so gloomy,” said Sirius, “I expect Madam Rosmerta might be able to pay you a little for your help.”

Rosmerta rolled her eyes at Sirius but said, “Yes I can pay you some pocket money.”

That clearly put a different spin on the matter. “Oooh,” Nico brightened right up.

“But,” Rosmerta continued, “you should ask your mother if she needs the money. It’s going to be expensive replacing everything you’ve lost.”

Nico heaved a resigned sigh, “I guess you need the money, Mum?”

“I think you can keep half,” said Amélie. “Does that sound fair? Half the money you earn will be put towards clothes and boring things like that, and with the other half you can buy some toys to replace the ones that were lost.”

“Yeah,” cheered Nico, enthusiasm restored.

Amy bounced around in response to her brother’s eagerness, “Me too. Me too, Mummy.”

Amélie glanced at Rosmerta who nodded. “Yes you too darling,” she promised. “Now let’s go back and collect the things Mrs Halloran found for us and move them to the room Madam Rosmerta’s set aside for us. Then we’ll get you started on gardening. Say goodbye to Lord Black and come along.”


Harry looked down at her small form utterly appalled. He hadn’t had time to take it in before but she was tiny, all thin fragile bird bones. He wanted to pick her up and put her somewhere safe. How could her mother just let her run around.

Sirius’ elbow in his ribs jerked him out of his freaked thoughts and he obediently waved bye-bye along with him. Then he elbowed Sirius back,

“She’s tiny. They’re both tiny. Shouldn’t they have like helmets or something?”

Sirius laughed at him, “Children that age practically bounce. I’d forgotten how much fun they are. Bloody little parrots into anything they can get their hands on.”
“But, knee pads? elbow pads?” Harry persisted plaintively, pointing at Amy as she tripped over the doorstep because she was walking backwards so she could keep on waving. Amélie steadied her without even looking.

“We don’t even wear them for Quidditch,” said Sirius with blithe unconcern. “Children have been surviving into adulthood for as long as we’ve existed.”

“But,” Harry waved a hand at Amy’s approximate head height. He looked at her again. She was skipping along. “I’m being an idiot aren’t I?”

“Yep, but a cute one. God only knows what you’d do if someone handed you a baby.”

Harry looked at his hands, trying to conceptualize an infant small enough to fit inside them Sirius laughed and swung around to hug him.

“It’s okay Harry, I’ll protect you from babies of dubious motives.”

“My hero.”

“That’s me. Now will you do me a favour and keep your eye on the wards. The goblins should have something in place by lunchtime. It should feel like a brewing thunderstorm. If there’s nothing, give me a call.”

“You got mobile phones to work in the Wizarding World?”

“No, we still regularly fry their circuits.” Sirius passed Harry a small compact mirror. “Say my name and it will connect you to my mirror and tap it to let me know if it’s urgent. If I call you, it will grow warm. If it’s an emergency it will be cold. Originally it buzzed, but we realized that was a bad plan after two seconds of thought. We tried vibrating next but figured out that wasn’t much better before we even left Hogwarts. On the other hand we got to see how much McGonagall twitches like a cat when there’s a noise just on the edge of her hearing.”

“And that was worth the risk?” Because Professor McGonagall was mildly terrifying, and Harry was calibrating against Voldemort.

Sirius grinned and waggled his hand in a so-so gesture. “James obviously thought so because after I described it to him, he made me call him while he was in detention so he could see for himself.”

Harry sighed, “Does he have no sense of self-preservation at all?”

“Not really.” Sirius wrinkled his nose. “Jay doesn’t let little things like that interfere with his plans.”

Harry sighed harder.

Sirius scowled at him, “You can’t say much. You’re at least as bad.”

“And you’re not?”

“The Blacks are the oldest extant wizarding family. We excel at self-preservation.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Clearly.” Merlin’s sake, Blacks died young for muggles, they excelled at many things, self-preservation was not one of them.

Sirius’ face flickered for just a second before settling into defiant. “Exactly.” He nodded firmly. “Self-preservation is what I’m good at.”
Harry couldn’t make sense of that half-second expression, but he was standing close enough to Sirius to feel his magic go all jangly like discordant cymbals. So he tucked himself around Sirius, feeling the discord increase until Sirius deliberately smothered it and it settled into resignation. And, oh, Sirius was an idiot.

Leaning forward to whisper lovingly into Sirius’ ear, he hissed, “You’ve annoyed both sides in this war so much neither of them are going to kill you because it would make the other guys too happy. Obviously you are a master of self-preservation. Moron.”

“It’s a valid tactic.” Sirius insisted as he relaxed and his magic curled happily into Harry.

“For morons.”

“Really, you’re very hurtful.” Sirius fluttered his lashes at him.

“Well you should stop being a moron then,” said Harry practically. “Thinking for one moment I’d believe you were actually sensible enough to worry about self-preservation.”

Sirius laughed, so warm and bright it was exactly how Harry imagined Greece would feel. “I can be an idiot, it is true.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed and kissed him.

After far too short an interval, Sirius pulled back, his head tilting as he listened, “Okay, that’s James arriving. Let’s go out and meet him – and put off the moment he finds out about the village’s new favourite game. Just before he drags me round the Aurors would not be great timing.”

“Why wouldn’t James like Splat-a-Mort?”

“It’s not the game he’d have an issue with. Now come on.” Sirius took his hand and towed Harry out the door. James was walking up the street towards them and raised a hand in greeting.

“Hey,” he called. “We all still alive?”

“Just about,” Sirius called back, “You?”

“More or less. You ready to go?”

Which was when a harried man, in off-centre formal robes, dashed up, “Lord Black, Lord Black. I’m sorry to trouble but may I have a small word.”

Sirius’ eyes danced and Harry absolutely knew something sarky was on the tip of his tongue, so he kissed him quickly drawing it into his own mouth. Sirius groaned and he pulled back reluctantly.

“Go be Lord Black for a bit,” Harry ordered.

“You’re no fun,” Sirius accused.

“After we’ve got rid of You-Know-Whatsit, you can be as sarky as you like.”

“Oh fine, be all responsible. You’re as bad as Lily.” Sirius shuffled over to smile at the harried man, “Good morning Mr Hooper. I have a meeting at the Ministry today along with Mr Potter but I can spare a moment. How may I assist you?”

James looped his arm with Harry’s and drew him off to one side,
“Come on, if we get drawn into the conversation we’ll never get away. Stand over here with me and I can look impatiently at my watch in a minute or two.”

Harry twitched after Sirius but went with James because he couldn’t actually follow Sirius around all day. He glared at the interloper though, and was pleased to see James was also giving him a dirty look.

“Merlin,” said James. “It only took him nearly killing himself defending the village for them to remember he’s a Lord. I wonder how long it’s going to last.”

“It better last,” muttered Harry. “He’s having wards put in for them.”

“Good plan after last night,” agreed James. “You-know-who is going to be frothing at the mouth. Though I hear it doesn’t take much.” He grinned at Harry and Harry grinned back.

“Sirius is talking about a heartstone at the centre of the wards,” said Harry. “I thought wards were put up around the property boundary?”

“You can do either,” said James. “Boundary wards are quicker to put up, and easier to maintain. They’re also easier to break and if you break a boundary ward, the protections all collapse immediately. Heartstone wards come from the centre, you can drive them back but the core remains safe – unless you manage to blow the heartstone, which is very much the nuclear option.”

Harry waited but no further information was forthcoming. “Go on then,” he demanded.

“What?” Then James laughed, “Oh right, you’ve been having Sirius ramble at you. Well contrary to what His Rambliness might think, it is possible to give a succinct, accurate answer to a question. Harry glowered, “I like Sirius’ stories.”

“Of course you do,” said James. “If you didn’t you’d have strangled him by now to shut him up.”

Harry glowered some more. “I like Sirius stories. I like hearing him talk about magic, and his family. I even like hearing him talk about you.”

“His family, huh.” James’ eyebrows went up, then, after a moment, he said, “You seem intelligent enough, I assume I don’t need to explain how unpleasant I will make things for you if you take advantage of Sirius?”

Harry shook his head. If he’d had any intention of taking advantage of Sirius he would definitely have arranged a very tragic accident for James first.

“Because I’d be happy to ramble through some stories if that would help?”

“Shut up.”

“Oh? aren’t my stories good enough for you?”

“Shut up.”

James grinned and ruffled his hand through Harry’s hair. Harry seriously resented how nice that felt. He liked James a lot more than he wanted to.

“You should ask Sirius to tell you about wards,” said James, still grinning away. Harry wanted to shove him, decided what the hell, and shoved him. James went on grinning and ruffled his hair again. Harry glared in outrage. James looped one long arm around his shoulders and hugged him.
“This is only going to make your pout worse, and I can’t actually imagine a circumstance where it becomes relevant, but – if you have a problem and Sirius can’t or won’t help, or even if Sirius is the problem, remember I’m your friend too.”

Harry glowered (he was not pouting, that was ridiculous) “You’re supposed to be the suspicious one.”

“Ah no, I’m not the suspicious one. Now don’t forget, and don’t forget to ask Sirius about ward magic. The Black family were single-handedly responsible for the decline in popularity of heartstone wards in Wizarding Britain. They still use them on the Continent but over here it’s been boundary wards all the way since the fourteenth century. And still people will keep on annoying the Blacks.”

“There are some very stupid people in the world.” Harry agreed.

“Preach,” James lifted one hand for a high-five. Harry rolled his eyes but indulged him. James grinned and did a mini-fist pump,

“Woo! I definitely wearing you down.”

“Are you always this ridiculous?”

“Nah, sometimes I’m worse.”

Harry tugged at his hair in exasperation. “You are nowhere near as charming as you think you are.”

“I’ve been told that before,” James grinned at him sunnily. “I wore them down too.” Suddenly he tilted his head, his too-clever eyes bright and sharp, “Your mysterious last name isn’t Evans by chance, is it?”

“I, no what – Why would you think that?”

“No reason at all.”

Harry’s pulse was still sky-rocketing round his body. He glowered at James’ attempt at an innocent face,

“You are very annoying.”

“I’ve definitely been told that before.”

Harry wanted to like James a lot more than it was safe to. He glanced across at Sirius who was still stuck talking to the interloper. Sirius had started to tap his foot against the pavement in agitation.

“Yeah,” James agreed and made a show of looking at his watch, before glaring at the man. Concentrating, Harry could hear the man fluttering about, “should let you go, so grateful for your condescension,” and basically doing everything but shutting up and letting Sirius go.

James ostentatiously looked at his watch again, then said loudly, “Sirius come along, we mustn’t keep Madam Bones waiting.”

Sirius attempted to draw away but the man kept talking.

“Sirius!”
“Coming James.” Sirius finally disentangled himself and joined them. “Merlin,” he muttered, “I think my life was easier when they weren’t talking to me.” Harry gave him a commiseratory hug.

“The death eaters haven’t attacked Hogsmeade before?” he asked, because that seemed odd.

“No. Not this time around,” said Sirius. “I’m not sure why.”

James rolled his eyes, “Because they were too wary of you, you stupid mutt. Not even death eaters are stupid enough to deliberately pick a fight with you unless directly ordered to by you-know-who. And you-know-who has every intention of killing you himself.” James turned to Harry, “That’s right the mutt here managed to annoy the dark lord so much he’s on his personal hit list.”

“That was not my fault,” squawked Sirius. “And you can talk, my dear deer.”

“He hates you way more than me.”

“This is not a competition,” said Harry, because that was the sort of sensible thing he heard Hermione say all the time. He instantly collected two scorching glares that informed him it was very much a competition.

“Anyway,” said Sirius. “James is clearly talking nonsense, because the death eaters just attacked Hogsmeade.”

“And the circumstances were not normal,” said James. “Harry annoyed Snape more successfully than anyone since you and me.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Harry confessed anxiously. “It was only he said such things.”

“That is Snape’s speciality,” said James. “But you managed to keep your temper and wind him right up in return. Also you’re with Sirius, which, well he’d hate you for that alone.”

“You make me happy,” said Sirius, abruptly losing the ability to look Harry in the eye.

“Snape was satisfied as long as Sirius was hated and miserable, but you showed up. You were turning things Sirius’ way. And you annoyed the hell out of him. It’s not surprising Snape couldn’t stand it.”

“But Snape is a member of your Order.”

“It’s not my Order. And Snape didn’t join up because he decided murdering people was wrong, he joined up because there was a direct threat to someone he cared about. He might be a member of the Order, and he might be dedicated to the overthrow of you-know-who – although I’d like some documented proof of that – but that doesn’t mean he can’t enjoy the perks of being a death eater.”

“You think Snape set the death eaters on Hogsmeade?” Harry felt as if he should defend Snape but it seemed like something Snape was perfectly capable of doing.

“That implies he had to work at it. I don’t think he had to do more than bring up the idea. Mulciber has hated Sirius since school just like Snape.”

Sirius swished one hand, “People get so offended when you won’t let them hex the first years.”

“Shush you,” James smacked his arm. “So you-know-who might insist on his right to kill Sirius personally, but that doesn’t mean they couldn’t kill you. Or at least crucio you out of your mind.”

“Oh no,” said Sirius, “This is Snape and Mulciber we’re talking about. They’ll have wanted to
“crucio Harry just enough to make him leave me, hopefully spitting bile at me as he goes.”

“Well they’d have been shit out of luck,” said Harry fiercely.

“They were out of luck all over,” said James. “I don’t think Snape would have under-estimated you so badly, he’s a half-blood himself so although he’s prejudiced, he’s not usually stupid about it. Mulciber, on the other hand, would have discounted you as soon as he heard you were a born-muggle.”

“So they waited until we were back at the Three Broomsticks and then attacked with initiating the fledges as their reason and excuse.” Sirius shook his head, “Bastards.”

Harry had been trying to avoid the obvious conclusion but he could only make himself so blind, “So the attack was my fault,” he admitted shakily.

“No,” said Sirius.

James huffed in exasperation. “I will revise my opinion of your intelligence,” he threatened. “Of course it’s not your fault. You might be the proximate cause but that does not mean it is anybody’s fault except the death eaters.”

Harry squirmed.

“I know it’s difficult to accept because it ruins any illusion of control but you are not actually responsible for anything but your own actions.”

“I intended to provoke Snape.”

“And you did it excellently too. Provoking Snape can’t be held against anybody. And from what rumour tells me you also threw Lord Greengrass from the Three Broomsticks. I’ve yet to see him arrange for an attack on Hogwarts in frustration.”

Harry wriggled his shoulders uncomfortably, too used to the weight of the world resting there. He was used to taking the blame for Voldemort’s attacks, for not killing him fast enough, for him coming back in the first place. Even his friends tended to act like it was Harry’s job and he should just get on with it. Even Hermione, who helped him unstintingly, never thought for a moment that murdering Voldemort maybe shouldn’t be Harry’s responsibility.

He’d dropped all that weight when he came to this universe but it had felt wrong. He was almost too free like he might float away. He knew his role and braced himself to reshoulder his burden.

“Definitely revising my opinion of your intelligence,” said James. “The world is not your responsibility to carry alone.”

Sirius coughed loudly. It soundly suspiciously like, pot, kettle. Harry looked at him, Sirius who had so furiously scorned the idea of Neville as the chosen one being responsible for destroying Voldemort. He looked at James, who clearly felt the same. The idea that he might not have to shoulder the whole world, that he shouldn’t have to, settled in his mind and he maybe believed it this time. He looked again at James and had the disturbing urge to thank him, instead he said,

“I don’t know how you can say Sirius is the rambly one.”

James laughed at him and gently slapped him on the back, “A little more respect for your elders please.”
“Yes,” agreed Harry. “You are so very elderly at thirty-five. Such accumulated wisdom, teach me oh ancient one.”

“Shocking insolence.” James scooped him up in a careful hug and Harry maybe let himself soak up the contact before shoving him away. James allowed himself be pushed back, but returned to loop heavy arms around Sirius and Harry’s shoulders. Harry shared a disgruntled glance with Sirius.

“Yes, Jay is definitely too bloody tall.”

“Sour grapes,” crowed James and scrunched his hands through their hair.

“How do you put up with him?” Harry whined at Sirius.

“I’ve known him so long I’m practically immune.”

“What’s that? I need to put more effort in? Consider it done,” said James, and Sirius groaned,

“Walked into that one.”

“Yep.” James grinned at him smugly, then turned to Harry, “Now I’m sorry but us ancient ones have to go set up secret plans and clever tricks with Madam Bones. I’ve owled Bill, he and Charlie are going to come over for a lesson on muggle houses later this morning. We’ll need about fifteen that can be blown up without putting anyone’s life at risk.”

Harry figured that should be easy enough, “Yeah, okay.”

“Great.”

“And,” Harry fidgeted nervously, because maybe James was right and he didn’t have to do it all himself, “I have information about you-know-who, about his plans. It’s not definite,” because he might have changed things around.”

“He should have changed things around now you’ve left, but clear thinking has never been you-know-who’s strong point. Anyway, anything you can tell us will be useful as insight to what he’s thinking. We should –” James glanced across the street where a couple stood, eyeing them anxiously and shuffling their feet as if they were nerving themselves to interrupt.

“Right, now is not the time. We’ll go through it when we get back?” James tilted his head in question at Harry, who nodded. “Alright then. Come on Sirius, let’s get out of here before any more of your fan club show up.”

“Merlin yes,” agreed Sirius. He leaned across to give Harry a quick kiss. “Should be back for lunch,” he promised. “Be safe.”

“You’re the one visiting the Aurors,” said Harry. “You be safe.”

“How about everyone be safe.” James tugged at Sirius’ sleeve, “Move Padfoot, or we’ll be stuck here all day.”

“Fine,” said Sirius. “Harry –”

“Merlin, come on,” swore James. He grabbed Sirius’ wrist and apparated them both away with a sharp little pop.

Harry sighed and waved goodbye to the empty space.
“What the hell?” yelped Sirius as they landed outside the Ministry. “We were in the middle of saying goodbye.”

“No you weren’t,” said James. “You’d barely started. There was easily another five minutes of you being nauseatingly sappy left to go. I have my limits you know.”

“Oh be quiet. I’m not bad.”

“Sure you’re not. From what Harry said, you’ve been telling him Black family stories.”

Flush burning furiously across his skin, Sirius muttered, “People tell each other about their families.”

“People might do, but you don’t.” Which was nothing but the truth. James didn’t say anything else, just waited as they filtered their way through the Ministry.

“Oh fine,” said Sirius at last, because he was terrible at withstanding the silent treatment and James took shameless advantage. “It’s not like I can tell him the real truth is it? And I feel slightly less awful about that if I at least tell him the truth about my family.”

James predictably looked stricken. “Pads.”

“Don’t look at me like that. You haven’t changed your mind have you?”

“No.”

“There you go then.”

“I’m so –”

“Don’t even start. I’ve been putting this argument off, but if you want to have it now..?”

“I hate arguing with you,” said James. He looked aggravated too, which was so unfair, Sirius wasn’t the one being unreasonable.

“So let’s not. Let’s go make a spectacle of ourselves in front of the entire Auror department.”

For a second it looked like James was going to be difficult, then he sighed, “There’s nothing we enjoy more than making a spectacle of ourselves.” It was a tired effort from his best friend but Sirius made himself smile brightly,

“Exactly.”

“Alright then.” James shook his head violently and ran both hands through his hair. Then he got his game face on and grinned sharply. Sirius grinned back, because yes everything was still a mess but at least they now they were fighting back.

“You ready?” James checked.

Sirius nodded and flipped up the hood of his robe, pulling it forward until it hid his face.

“You should have been an unspeakable. You’re melodramatic enough.”

He made his voice reverberate as low and gravelly as he could, “How do you know I’m not one?”
“You know I would believe that. In fact I do believe that. Stop messing with my view of the world.”

Sirius smiled to himself. James was so easy.

“Let’s go then.” James’ arm flopped down over his shoulder. To an outsider it would look too heavy and confining, but it was wonderfully reassuring as they made their way through the Ministry to the Auror offices. Sirius did not like the Ministry and he was even less fond of the Aurors.

“I’m sticking with you,” James reminded. “I’m not going to let anything happen.”

Sirius kicked his foot because they weren’t talking about any of that.

“Although there’s a certain entertainment value to imagining Harry’s reaction if I went back and told him they were keeping you.”

“Prongs.”

“Oh I won’t. The plan is to take over the Ministry, not burn it down. But it would be entertaining.”

“Stop acting like Harry’s some sort of lethal weapon.”

James hugged him tighter for a moment.

“What was that for?”

“No reason. Did he like the book?”

“Yes, he did.”

“And?”

“What?”

“What aren’t you telling me Pads? There’s definitely something.”

“Stop reading my mind, it’s cheating.”

“I don’t need to read your mind when you make it so obvious. So what happened? You said he took you turning into a dog okay. He didn’t go muggle-weird about it all, did he?”

“No.”

“So what did happen?”

Sirius gave up because it wasn’t as if he wouldn’t tell James eventually. “He flicked through the book last night, this morning he must have had another glance at it, and then he turned into a cat.”

“Honestly? Just like that?”

“Honestly. And he squawked like anything about it. It was hilarious. He didn’t know what to do with his legs, staggering around all wobbly like a certain Bambi I remember. Cute as hell.”

“Shut up, Thumper.”

“See, that’s not actually an insult. He was the cool one.”
“I think trying to claim there was a cool one in a Disney movie is the epitome of uncool.”

“I think using the word cool dates us both irreparably.”

“Probably. And stop trying to change the subject. He straight out turned into a cat?”

“Yep. And once I got him calmed down he had no problems changing back.”

“Sirius,” James began solemnly. Sirius wasn’t interested,

“I’m not listening.”

“Sirius, we have no idea where he’s come from – although I’m starting to wonder – and he tore through those death eaters. Now you’re telling me he became an animagus just like that.”

“You’ve met him. The alley cat was always near the surface.”

“You’re not concerned at all?”

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be concerned about.

“I told him the story of Starlight, and for a moment I wondered,” he admitted.

“Of course you did,” James grumbled. “You are ridiculously besotted.”

Sirius hunched in on himself because it wasn’t like he didn’t know it was stupid to think he might be worth such a gift from magic.

“Arrgh,” groaned James. “You are so bad for my blood pressure.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. And if anyone deserves magic pulling in their favour it’s you. And, huh, if his name is what I think it might be then there would be no better family line.”

Sirius squinted at him, “You don’t like any of the families,” his voice wavered into a question.

“True enough.” James beamed. Sirius kicked his ankle.

“Don’t grin at me like you know something I don’t.”

“But it’s so entertaining.”

Sirius shoved him and James shoved him back then flopped over him with all his unfair extra height. Sirius snarled at him. James just laughed,

“Sore loser,” he accused.

“Just wait until we get out of here,” Sirius threatened.

“I’m quaking in my boots.” James let up on his flop enough so they could start making forward progress again. “So, seriously –”

“Must you?”

“Seriously, are not going to ask any questions. Just leave it at wondering?”
“If you speak a seal-wife’s name, they’ll vanish back into the sea.” Sirius wasn’t stupid enough to poke at his miracle.

“Fair enough."

Sirius was positive that wasn’t the end of it though but he was happy to put off that argument for later too. They’d reached the Aurors’ section now, and came to a halt outside the main door. He didn’t feel remotely nostalgic.

“You sure about this?” James checked.

“Oh yeah.” Sirius was so ready to start taking these bastards down. “Stop looking so anxious. I’ve got the easy part.”

“Of course you think that. Come on then. Let’s do this.” James shoved him towards the door and Sirius thumped his arm against it, rattling the door loudly enough that it sounded as if a body had slammed into it.

The door was yanked open an Auror glared at them.

“Careful. What are you doing here anyway, Potter?”

“Madam Bones wanted to speak to Black about the situation in Hogsmeade last night.”

“Black?” The Auror yanked Sirius’ hood back and Sirius blinked his eyes, letting them well with liquid. He hadn’t cried for real in years but his mother was never satisfied until she had reduced them to tears (and could yell at them about that) so Sirius had learned how to fake it. (Reggie never had and was inevitably reduced to wailing, red eyes, and snot, so Sirius had learned how to be better at getting the blame.)

The Auror laughed, “Come right on in.”

James proceeded to drag him around the large squad room carefully banging him into the desks while Sirius, tripped, stumbled, and let his eyes roll around wild and frightened Together they watched the reactions of the Aurors and support teams while the already busy room grew crowded as they busted in to see what the fuss was about and stayed for the entertainment.

Sirius also whined and begged continuously until James shook him once for real. Sirius raised an eyebrow at him because what, like it was his fault he sounded exactly like Timothy Macmillan begging for an extension to an essay deadline. The whiniest sixth year to ever grace Hogwarts with his presence deserved to be imitated. Sometimes Sirius would randomly grant his class an extension just for the histrionics.

James yanked him closer, “You and your abominable sense of humour,” he hissed in his ear, and Sirius shuddered because it was so hard not laughing. James was having the same trouble, he was wearing his deeply frustrated look, which meant he was barely holding back the giggles. He’d lost all the stiff tension in spine and the snap of anger in his eyes. Jay was so easy.

Now James was sorted Sirius focused more on his surveys of the room. The majority of the Aurors were hostile, mocking and jeering at him. But there were four who had been students back when he and James started teaching who had settled against the wall and looked like they wanted popcorn to enjoy the show. One woman had nearly said something a couple of times, and actually gone to stand up before her partner tugged her back and frowned warningly. She scowled in agreement, then subtly tilted her arm so she could aim her wand without drawing it from her holster and Sirius had to reach down to catch the stinging jinx before it struck James. He spun them both around as
he did so and hoped the woman had missed it.

It took him a moment to recognize the pinched and fussy admin worker who quickly vanished towards the Head of Magical Law Enforcement’s office to fetch Bones. Viezel, who was neither pinched nor fussy naturally, came back to watch their progress with a disconcertingly canny look on his face. As they walked past he swung his good leg at Sirius in a vicious kick, and James, the prat, fell for it, jerking Sirius out the way. Viezel grinned narrowly.

Sirius thumped James over the back of the head.

“Seriously?” he hissed.

“Oh shut up.”

“Gentleman!” Bones said loudly. “And I use that term loosely.” Quiet began to drift over the room.

“Potter! Black! My office now!”

James shoved him over and they staggered along until Bones shut the door of her office behind them, when they straightened up and shook themselves out.

Bones looked at them, she did exasperated almost as well as McGonagall, “Do you want to tell me what that was about?”

Amelia glared as they exchanged quick glances and nudged each other with their elbows. They reminded her of her brothers squabbling over who was at fault for broken vase (window, picture, door, the list went on) and she suddenly felt crushingly old.

“I’m waiting,” she said and rapped her fingernails against the desk. It did not make her feel any younger.

“We needed something quick and dirty,” said Potter as if no further explanation should be needed. Amelia looked automatically to Black for the translation.

“We needed a quick way to map out the various alliances,” said Black. “We haven’t got time for a long process of sifting through who’s siding with who. There’s nothing that gives you away faster than who you laugh with.”

Amelia nodded. She was as annoyed as hell it was necessary but it was a good way of quickly fighting their way through the tangled mess of competing allegiances in her Squad Room.

“We brought a penesieve so we can go through things thoroughly. But first, we should give Smudge a yell, he definitely knows something is up. James, the idiot, gave us away.”

“Oh I like that,” said Potter. “As if you didn’t catch that stinging hex.”

“Yeah but I didn’t get caught. Smudge was already suspicious.”

“Quiet,” said Amelia. “I’d forgotten what a sparkling joy it is to work with the pair of you.” She rubbed at the building ache in her head.

They beamed at her bright as buttons, the sarcasm flying completely over their heads. Amelia sighed and crossed the room to open the door,

“Viezel, come in here and take notes for me.”
“Of course Madam Bones.” With a obsequious nod of his head Viezel oiled in slickly deferential until Amelia had shut the door and reset the privacy wards; then he straightened and glared at the miscreants,

“You two are still so goddamn sloppy it’s downright embarrassing. I’d have you running drills for a month.”

“Aww Smudgie,” cooed Black. “We missed you too.”

“I didn’t miss you two idiots one iota, or the head-aches you cause on the job.”

“No?” Black and Potter both blinked, projecting desperate and heart-broken for all their worth. For a second they looked disturbingly alike.

“No,” said Viezel adamantly, but the glare was cracking. He waved his arms around and looked to Amelia for rescue. “Do something with them Chief.”

“What do you expect me to do?” asked Amelia amused, and grateful to see the team clicking back into place. “You’ve set them a month of drills before and it just made them worse.”

Viezel glared as best he could with his face grin-split.

Amelia sighed.

Returning to the Three Broomsticks Harry found the queue to Splat-a-mort had dwindled as people started to get on with the business of the day. The last few lingering apprentices were chased out by a loud voiced wizard, who, after they were gone, looked around the check he was unobserved by anyone but Harry, and then sent six darts thudding home in quick succession as the picture shrieked in impotent fury.

The wizard flexed his fingers happily. “That was possibly five of the most satisfying minutes of my life. A very good morning to you, Master Harry.” And he strode off whistling.

Harry flicked his wand at the room, and all the scattered glasses gathered themselves together and began trooping into the kitchen. After setting the dishwasher going with a stern look, he pulled out a sack of potatoes and sent them tumbling into the sink so the scrubbing brush could set to work.

He was setting the chickens to roast (he didn’t like doing that with magic because he found the moving naked chicken bodies to be too freaky) when he heard the creep of steps trying to sneak. One floorboard whined in protest and steps stopped for a long thirty seconds before creeping forward again.

Harry cleaned his hands, then quietly walked through to the main room to check what was going on.

A witch hunched up in a hooded robe had stopped to just stare at the Voldesnort image. As Harry watched she tentatively stretched up and took one of the darts down from the holder on the wall they’d automatically returned to. She twiddled the dart between her fingers and winced as she tested the sharp tip against her finger. Staring at the image of Voldemort she rubbed her thumb against the dart, the rest of her body still and watchful.

Then the illusion waved its wand and all the leashed stillness exploded. She apparated the last few paces with a harsh bang-crack and thumped down holding the dart backwards like a knife. She
slammed the point into Voldemort and the image squealed. Laughing shrilly, she brought the dart back to slam it home again, and again, again. She was still laughing, high with hysteria and tears.

Harry’s hand clenched into fists but he was too late to fight anyone for her. He did nod at the door, and it locked itself so nobody could walk in on her.

She dragged the dart through the cloth and it screeched like metal on metal. Still thrumming with so much unsatisfied magic Harry could feel it across the room, she ripped the cloth off the wall and tore it to pieces with nails and teeth. Dropping the shreds, she ground them into the floor with the heel of her boot.

Harry wrapped his arms around his chest in a self-hug. He wanted to do something, to help, but he had no idea what that could be. Behind him the coffee machine gurgled into life.

The witch’s manic energy had wound down and she was just standing there. Her shudders were gradually fading, it looked like she was slowly turning to stone.

“Uh, hello?” Harry called. He didn’t think she had enough magic to turn herself into stone, but magicals had frozen themselves solid before. They’d lost one of the Ministry wizards at Hogwarts that way when he heard his wife had been killed. His muggle-raised co-workers hadn’t realized what was happening until it was too late.

The witch jerked around to face him, her eyes huge dark pools in her ash grey face.

“Your café crème,” said Harry loudly.

Her head jolted as the words clicked through her. Harry set the mug down with a clunk. Social programming took over and she juddered towards him. She tripped into the bar and nearly stumbled over the stool before she managed to seat herself and picked up the mug with clumsy fingers.

Harry carefully flicked a gentle finger and wrapped a cooling charm around the mug. He wasn’t sure she was aware enough not to scald herself. Still on automatic she sipped at the drink and gradually grew to look more like a person and less like a corpse.

As the pink came back into her skin, her hands started to shake and she carefully put the mug down. Harry placed his hand down beside it, palm up. One hand crept out across the bar top clasped at his. Harry let her hold on, loosely at first, then with all her tight trembling strength.

Finally her breathing steadied and the desperate grip eased into a clasp. With one quick grateful squeeze of his hand, she drew back and picked up the mug again, holding it in front of her face as a shield. She took another sip, and choked,

“That’s revolting.” She dumped the mug back down. “It’s far too sweet and on top of that, it’s cold.”

“Very sorry, ma’am.” Harry removed the disdained coffee. “Let me get you a new one.”

The coffee machine rumbled into life and a mug danced underneath to collect the much darker brew.

“Here,” Harry passed it over. “Try this.”

She sniffed at the drink, its warmth flushing her features. “Much better. Thank you.”
“There’s nothing.”

She deliberately looked directly at him. Her eyes were swollen and red-rimmed but her gaze was clear and direct.

“Thank you.”

He shrugged his shoulders to disclaim her gratitude, it wasn’t as if he’d done anything useful. “Those dark tossers are nothing but a bunch of dicks.”

She spluttered on her chocolatey-coffee as her laugh caught her off-guard. “Yes,” she said, “yes they are nothing but a bunch of dicks.” She laughed again with real humour not the strained mania of earlier. “I have no idea how nobody noticed this earlier.”

“I had a friend who used to say wizards wouldn’t notice a hand in front of their face if it punched them on the nose.”

“That’s wizard-raised for you. No damn sense at all. Us muggles are supposed to be better than that.”

“We get dazzled by the razzamatazz.” Both the good and the bad. Even Hermione got so dazzled by the house elves she missed other, darker undercurrents. Not that Harry was trying to argue he was any better, his fixation on the dementors was just as bad. They should have focused their attention on the people who thought using house elves and dementors was a good idea.

To be fair to the wizard-raised they had the same damn problem. The gaudily obvious kept everyone so distracted that they had no time to pay attention to the insidious abuses of power below the surface. Harry didn’t think it was entirely their fault though, when you got down to it, Voldemort was very distracting.

The witch sighed and nodded in agreement, “We do, we do.” She turned her head towards the scraps of cloth on the floor. “Not much razzamatazz there though.”

“Nope,” said Harry, and they smiled at each other.

The door to the rest of the pub suddenly popped open and Rosmerta stumbled in,

“Harry! Are you alright? The door was stuck. What happened?”

“Uh, me and –”

“Elspeth,” said the witch.

“– me and Elspeth were just talking.”

Rosmerta’s quick, kind eyes took in the witch and then the mess of the enchantment on the floor. “Uh huh,” she said. “Well the Davingons are here. The children are helping me with the garden, Elspeth. Would you be willing to supervise?”

“I – you know what, that would be very nice. Thank you, Rosmerta.”

“Excellent. Harry can you tidy the place and open up again?”

Harry gave her a sloppy salute and went to deal with the bunch of scraps on the floor. It seemed wrong though to restore what Elspeth had destroyed. He pointed two fingers at the heap of rags like a muggle gun, jerking his hand to fire, and burnt them up. Now that was satisfying. Sirius”
enchantment was top-notch – not that Harry had expected anything else – and the thing wailed like a lost soul as the mess shrivelled into ashes. Harry grinned sharply.

Not wanting to end Hogsmeade’s game so soon, he summoned another bar towel and replaced the image. He glanced at the dartboard, and then decided it might be better to shift things somewhere private, so he hung Voldesnort up in the little back parlour. It was a tiny room with a huge red velvet reclining sofa, and now Harry thought about it, it seemed likely it was actually the shagging parlour. It had old privacy wards too, that mostly felt worn down and exasperated. Harry tried to boost them with his own magic but distinctly felt they were grumbling at them.

Rosmerta appeared, “You’re not going to get anywhere with those wards. Sirius’ wards may think you’re the best thing since sliced bread, but those wards have been there for years. They were last renewed by Professor McGongall –”

Harry hastily petted the door frame in apology and backed away.

“– the Deputy Headmistress at the castle. It’s quite a tradition. Professor McGonagall wasn’t convinced but she said since the Hogwarts board won’t let her cast chastity charms on her students a few warded locations was probably better than letting them get creative.”

“It is the shagging parlour,” said Harry delighted. He wondered if it had existed back in the other universe and was vaguely sad he hadn’t know anybody to ask.

“The wards notify me if there’s any upset. And it will keep things private. Most students don’t figure that out, though you haven’t seen entertaining until you’ve seen young James Potter hammering on the wards yelling at Sirius Black to hurry it up.”

“Why would you tell me that,” moaned Harry. He could imagine that far too vividly.

Rosmerta grinned at him, “I’m a mean, mean person.”

Harry nodded in solemn agreement.

“Their dates weren’t any more impressed than you are. Two slaps to two faces and then the pair of them were in my bar drinking all night and getting hustled at pool.”

Harry smiled at the idea of it. “You’d show me Sirius’ baby pictures if you could, wouldn’t you?”

“I told you, I’m mean. There have to be some compensations for keeping an eye on that pair of disasters. I think they provided dowries for all three of Pete Stepney’s sisters before they figured out they weren’t going to beat him. Though they might have realized sooner and just kept playing along. I can’t tell with them sometimes. They can be astonishingly sly when they put their minds to it.”

“You shock me.”

Rosmerta flicked him with her duster.

Amelia smiled at her little team. They’d watched Potter and Black’s memories several times – and argued more than a bit – and come up with a plan that should allow her to at least suspend the majority of the death eaters and their sympathisers.

“Then all we need to do is get rid of you-know-who and you can expel them for good,” said Potter.
Amelia couldn’t decide if the casual assumption you-know-who would be disposed of was annoying or reassuring. It was a long time since she’d spoken to someone who considered you-know-who defeatable.

“Along those lines,” she said, “I’ve done some investigation and while I can’t hire, or fire, as I chose, what I can do is hire consultants.”

“Consultants?” Viezel asked, warily hopeful. “Is this what your call to America was about?”

“How do you know about,” she cut herself off. “Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know anything I might have to be official about. And yes, this is why I called America. Michael Easton took a position there when he left. He knew he was my choice for the Head of the Aurors. So I called him, told him I couldn’t promise anything, but maybe… And he agreed to take emergency leave from his job – from what he didn’t say I think our American cousins are getting a trifle concerned – and come back as a consultant. He’d said he’d ask around and maybe bring a few other people. So I’m hopeful things will improve numbers-wise. He took his team with him when he left.”

“And eleven support staff,” Viezel added.

Amelia closed her eyes for a second, “I didn’t know that. Why did nobody tell me?”

“What could you have done about it? They were all born-muggles – except for Purslane who’d made almost as much of a nuisance of herself as Black here – and with Easton gone…” Viezel shrugged his shoulders. “Why hang around for a knife in the back.”

“Yeah, you have way more sense than that, don’t you,” said Black pointedly.

“Merci du compliment,” Viezel blew him a mocking kiss that landed on his cheek with a sting of red.

Black yelped, “Hey! You’re the one hanging around waiting to get murdered in a dark alley.”

“I’m way too past it to be considered a threat.”

“Daft buggers. I’d have murdered you years ago.”

“Now that’s a compliment.” Viezel swept his arm through the air and half-bowed in thanks.

“Tsk, tsk,” Potter wagged his finger at them. “Sirius has a boyfriend now, you know,” he scolded Viezel, then turned on Black, “What would Harry say if he saw you flirting like that.”

“Alley cat?” Black leaned back in his chair unconcerned, “He’d join in.”

Potter smacked his hand over his face, “Was it too much to ask for a good influence?”

“You know who the good influence is. And it’s definitely not me or Harry.”

Viezel groaned out loud, “Are you telling me there’s another one of them?”

“Harry,” Amelia explained, feeling somebody should share her despair. “He was the one who killed Yaxley.”

“Harry did not kill Yaxley,” Black corrected. “He pushed him away and very accidentally broke his neck.”

Amelia rolled her eyes at the qualification.
“Oh well, more power to his elbow for that,” said Viezel. “But your boyfriend was there? Because those are not the rumours going around the squad room.”

Black shrugged his shoulders, “Can’t help that.”

“You could if you put some effort into. I don’t understand how the pair of you can be so unrelentingly terrible at selling a story.”

Black and Potter exchanged a glance, faces shadowed with secrets.

“I dunno,” Potter smiled slowly. “I think we do pretty well.”

“When we want to,” agreed Black, eyes glinting maliciously at some hidden joke.

Viezel stared at them, “And that’s another thing I don’t understand,” he stopped as his mouth dropped open. “Wait, wait. Do not tell me – you insane fuckers!”

“Well really,” Black plucked at his robe every inch the outraged pureblood dowager, “I hardly feel that sort of language is appropriate.”

Viezel turned the air blue as he explained at length how very fucking appropriate his fucking language was, thank you the fuck much.

Potter rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “I’m starting to think he’s going to pass out from lack of oxygen.”

“I do believe you’re right, my dearest dear.” Black leaned his head against Potter’s shoulder and they both watched with bright interested eyes as Viezel levitated right off his chair in his fury.

“You are the most evil devious crazy stupid – I can’t even. Forget everything else, how have you convinced everyone you’re sane.”

“Natural charm,” said Potter promptly and buffed his fingernails against his robe.

“It doesn’t make sense. You’re still unrelentingly terrible at selling a story. You couldn’t even drag Darling around the room convincingly.”

“It worked just fine.”

“Only because they’re all morons. What are you going to do if anyone pays attention?”

“That’s what we have you for Smudgie,” Black fluttered his eyelashes outrageously.

“Oh fine. Make me do all the work,” Viezel grumbled. But he was looking positively cheery, almost his real age for once instead of prematurely old. Amelia wasn’t sure what had set him off and she didn’t much care, the important thing was Potter and Black had managed to infect him with their optimism, their belief that you-know-who was somehow defeatable.

Sometimes believing you could win was the hardest part of the battle.

Later – after she’d heard back from Easton, who confirmed he was on his way back, together with his team, support staff, and five American Aurors who ‘fancied a holiday’; after Lettice Culpepper had called her back to say since her children were now both at Hogwarts (Amelia did not point out her youngest had been going for two years now) she’d be happy to come back and manage the Potions Lab; after Gabriel Norwood sent an owl from France saying if she could guarantee him two reliable guards he’d accept the opening in the prosecutor’s office – she was walking back through
the squad room and Viezel was there in the centre of a crowd chattering away as they hung on his every word. Whatever he was saying about Potter and Black was undoubtedly libellous judging from the sniggers and Amelia made sure to pull her face into a disapproving frown when she told him,

“We don’t need any of that sort of talk around here.”

Viezel yes ma’am ed her and pulled a face before her back was quite turned. She hadn’t seen him have so much fun in years.

Amelia was surprised to find herself genuinely smiling as she strode back to her office. The blasted pair had gone and infected her too.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!